Online Learning in Thailand- My Fulbright Experiences

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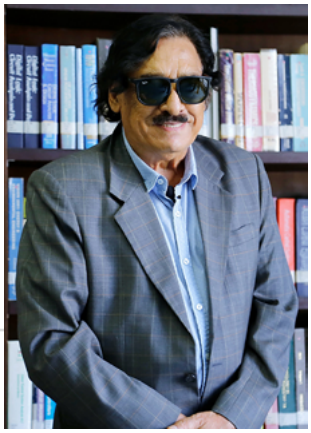
Abstract

In 2006 I was posted as a Fulbright fellow to work in Thailand. My main goal was to help a prominent Catholic university (Assumption University) develop a robust online learning system. My early exposure and experiences with online learning with WebCT in Seattle, WA, helped me assist my host university with various aspects of digital learning. This article is a shortened version of articles that appeared in my book "Guru Vs. Google," published in December 2021.

Keywords: Covid • digitization • eLearning • Thailand



My academic career began in the 1980s in Seattle, Washington. This is where Microsoft was born. It was also the time when the internet was just introduced. I was in the right place at the right time to start working as a part-time Information Technology (IT) instructor. While working, I developed expertise in using computers, operating systems, software applications, and internet-related technologies for classroom teaching. After three years of struggle, I took a tenure track position to teach IT courses in Seattle Community College District. In the last two years of the 1980s, I witnessed Novell Netware, Linux, Apple, Microsoft, Netscape, and America Online slowly becoming part of the IT landscape. Schools, colleges, and universities were starting to invest in integrating computer networks and the internet for classroom teaching.

Preparing for Fulbright Award

In the US, traditional distance learning started with postal, correspondence, and television courses. In the late 1980s, many universities in the US suddenly shifted to a new platform, the internet. While experimenting with various technologies, I came across Web Computer Tools (WebCT), developed at the University of British Columbia by a faculty member in computer science, Murray Goldberg. To continue his research, he built a system to ease the creation of a web-based learning environment. This led to the first version of the online teaching platform WebCT in early 1996. With WebCT, distance learning suddenly went on a new trajectory. My college became one of the first institutions to try this new platform. I was also one of the lucky faculty who was offered the opportunity as its regular user. After a few technical hassles, I started my journey with this new online learning platform. I was convinced that the new century starting in the year 2000, would usher in a new era to replace the century-old classroom teaching models.

Looking back, I can say that I had little interest in applying for a Fulbright Scholar Award. At that time, I was too busy at my college to give it a serious thought. I was also told that the faculty working in Community Colleges have a very slim chance of getting a Fulbright Award. One of my friends from Eastern Washington University in Pullman, WA, Dr. Mahalingam Iyer, a professor of Chemical Engineering, encouraged me to apply. In my application for the Fulbright fellowship, I highlighted my expertise and experiences with online learning and its various components. I am convinced that my early introduction to digital learning put me on track to receive a Fulbright Fellowship.

I am highly indebted to Nancy Verheyden, my department Dean, and Ron LaFayette, the President of NSCC, for their support. They approved my paid leave to represent Fulbright US in Thailand. After I was awarded a nine-month Fulbright Fellowship, Ms. Porntip. Kanjananiyot, the ex-Director of the Fulbright-Thai organization, visited my college in Seattle, WA. I am grateful to her for meeting with Nancy, Ron, and my other colleagues. After I arrived in Bangkok in 2006, she first placed me at the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT), a prominent regional center for higher education. Later she assigned me to Assumption University, where I started working with the College of Internet Distance Education (CIDE). My tasks involved helping CIDE design its online learning programs and courses.

Thailand: My experiences as a Fulbrighter

For more than a century, Face-to-Face (F2F) teaching has been the hallmark of modern education in every country. In Thailand, the increasingly burdensome regulations imposed by state agencies have contributed to a compliance-oriented culture of F2F instruction. Most Thai schools, colleges, and universities take great pride in promoting traditional values, a strict dress code, classroom attendance, a one-size-fits-all curriculum, and exam standards. State agencies, such as the Office of Higher Education Commission (OHEC), the operating body of the Higher Education Commission, and the Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assessment (ONESQA), are responsible for quality assurance. These two agencies and a few others have been accused of being more interested in forcing compliance rather than leading educational reforms. As a result, online learning has never been promoted or encouraged as an effective alternative to F2F teaching.

On my arrival in Bangkok in 2005, I came across a new open-source Learning Management System (LMS) called Moodle. Martin Dougiamas, who worked and studied at Curtin University, Australia, also had his first experience with WebCT, which prompted him to investigate an alternate online teaching platform. In 1999 he started the trial of his early prototypes of a new LMS called Moodle. I dissected several issues related to hosting online courses on this new platform. Starting in 2006, I published several articles on the Moodle platform, especially its various learning objects and

their functionality. In my research, I discovered that Thai students were not fully trained to take advantage of a virtual learning platform. It raised a few questions about whether Thai colleges and universities properly invest in training their faculty and students to use such innovative platforms. This is one of the major stumbling blocks for many institutions in Asia, especially in Thailand, where online learning has never been given a high priority.

Starting in 2019, the Covid pandemic forced the wholesale adoption of online learning at all levels of the Thai educational system. New learning models were initiated and labeled disruptive to the established norms and practices. With gradual ease in the pandemic in 2022, Thai institutions are now experimenting with "hybrid learning" that combines online learning and the old fashion classroom teaching to improve the overall experiences of students who have become quite comfortable with using portable devices and smartphones. Station Rotation, Flipped Classroom, and Lab Rotation are examples of hybrid models, and they are essential drivers that can enable more student-centered learning without overhauling the whole system. However, these hybrid models are what we call sustaining innovations; they improve the existing system along with the original performance measures rather than more disruptive ones that will use AI, VR, and cloud computing. These new trends are positioned to transform the classroom model and become engines of change over the longer term.

In a nutshell, flexibility has become the pinnacle of learning. The new digital learning models have many virtues. Thai students' unique circumstances and needs will drive which model is the right fit for any school, college, or university. For example, blended or hybrid learning may or may not be the new educational paradigm of tomorrow, but addressing students' needs now will help determine the best learning process for them. New models will help students move on with a flexible schedule according to their needs. During the pandemic, Thai teachers have been providing support and instruction on a flexible basis. At the same time, students have learned to work through coursework and tasks, giving them a high degree of control over their learning. Who wouldn't want that for their students? As a result, policymakers think that a flex model is disruptive, meaning teachers and students make a clean break from the traditional system rampant in Thailand. Of course, this is not feasible for every school, college, or university. Without some stepping stones, the new disruptive models can be a difficult or tedious leap for many Thai students. Not all have the maturity, study skills, and resources to succeed online. Adopting such models in many parts of Asia, especially Thailand, will possibly reform education. Along with many other issues, the digital divide remains one of the most significant issues in Thailand.

Covid Pandemic: Challenges of Educational Reforms in Thailand

During the last three years of the pandemic, lots of experimentation has occurred in the Thai educational establishment. Classroom-based teaching is now being replaced by what is known as blended or hybrid earning, which is not the same as technology-driven learning. For quite some time, we have known that technology upholds traditional systems and structures in every type of learning environment. Technology has often been customized to meet the needs of F2F instruction. Blended or hybrid learning, by contrast, unlocks flexibility in time and space, enabling much greater customization of technology to suit individual student needs. It is supposed to allow learning from any place, at any time, at our own pace.

The last three years of the pandemic have proven to be an accelerator of many new trends. Every academic institution is now facing financial hardships. Students aggressively explore new learning opportunities to secure their financial futures in the post-pandemic era. They are now looking for fast, more engaging, and creative learning opportunities to address their skill gaps and career goals. As Thai schools, colleges and universities are changing to address the needs of their current and future students; they must ensure that their faculty is also prepared for the next frontier of teaching and learning. And they must also change at a pace on par with industry demands to ensure students are equipped to meet the present and future opportunities in the new job market.

For a long time, Thai academia has failed to evolve with new trends and technologies at the pace necessary to ensure the growth, sustainability, and vitality of the communities it serves. During the pandemic, the industry has also shown rapidly shifting market demands. It desperately needs higher education to step up and pivot its alignment with its needs. Failure to do so will only lead to fractured relationships between universities and employers. This is becoming a severe issue in ASEAN and many other countries. It is increasingly becoming clear that rather than depending on higher education to prepare its workforce, the industry is now eager to design its curriculum and completely ignore the traditional higher education structure. As a result, many institutions are looking to retool themselves for new digital learning platforms designed to engage, educate, and improve enrollment.

The pandemic has also exposed the follies of the old system of a one-size-fits-all approach to education. To design education for the new normal, Thai policymakers must concentrate their efforts on providing more resources for those disciplines that have more catching up. In general, hands-on education, lab work, and internships in a work environment have suffered the most from the restrictions caused by the pandemic. These restrictions are bound to ease. In the last three years, new digital learning trends have rapidly evolved to address the challenges and have created innovative teaching opportunities.

In Thailand, for digital learning to evolve or replace the traditional mode of "*cram, jam, and pass the exam*" will require a significant policy shift. In other words, Thai institutions must change their traditional approaches to assessing learning outcomes to meet the realities of the new virtual learning environments. They should think more deeply about offering students digital skills that will help them quickly get back to jobs. Suppose Thai students are struggling to remain enrolled in colleges and universities. In that case, institutions must do everything to provide resources and prepare them for new jobs in the post-Covid era.

It is very likely that after the pandemic, colleges and universities will not be able to return to the old model of delivery of F2F education. In the post-Covid era, teaching and learning will differ from what they used to be. As mentioned above, various new mixtures of on-campus F2F customized learning, remote learning, flipped classrooms, and hybrid or blended learning have emerged.

As countries continue to retool their workforce, many Thai institutions are now thinking creatively about how to customize learning. Offering micro-credentials, such as professional certificates and micro-credentials, has proven to be effective in streamlining education and addressing skill gaps. It is happening but rather very slowly. There are many examples of competency-based micro-credentialing launched by edX, IEEE, UDEMY, and many other organizations for providing adult learners with highly interactive career education related to small businesses, entrepreneurship, and information technology. This new trend is helping quickly retool the adults' employment opportunities in the new job market.

Strategies for post-Covid era education now include integrating hybrid learning, conferencing tools, and new technologies such as Zoom, Microsoft Team, Google Classroom, WebEx, Learning Management Systems, and portals, such as Khan Academy, MOOCs, edX, and Udemy.

In my experience as a Fulbrighter, there seem to be three potential approaches to addressing the quality of the Thai educational system. They are closely linked to institutional autonomy, English language proficiency, and the skills of the teachers. The growth and sustainability of every country now depend on new technology skills and the ability of the faculty to provide practical learning experiences for a new era. Teaching and learning have already ZOOMED out of the classrooms. Digital learning is on the

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rise. Innovations in artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, social media, conferencing tools, and other new trends will blur the lines between F2F and online learning. Thailand's educational system has a long way to go in integrating these new technologies and trends in its educational system.

Notes

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Rev. Brother Dr. Bancha Saenghiran, President of the Assumption University of Thailand, presiding over the signing ceremony and publication of my book "Guru Vs. Google," now available on Amazon.

Biography

Kuldeep Nagi is a researcher at Assumption University, Bangkok, Thailand. He received his Fulbright Scholar Awards (2005-2006) in the US to lead his host university's efforts in developing a robust online learning alternative. He has been a speaker at MCT Global summit for the last three years and has participated in more than three dozen conferences. He is among the Top-10 Social Science Research Network (SSRN) authors. He can be contacted at knagi@au.edu