Perceptions of Students to Open and Distance Learning of Review Classes in a Review Center in the Philippines

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Abstract

The Commission on Higher Education (CHED, 2007) defined review centers as hubs offering programs or courses of study intended to refresh and enhance knowledge, competencies, and skills of students who have already studied in any formal school to prepare them for upcoming licensure examinations given by any license-giving body such as those given by the Professional Regulation Commission (PRC). There were several review centers that offered open and distance learning aside from their brick-and-mortar classes in several locations in the Philippines. This had been possible due to technological advances that led to the distribution of knowledge using internet-enabled services. Review for Global Opportunities (RGO) Review Center, a CHED-accredited review center, was one of the leading review centers in the field of psychometrician review in the Philippines with having over 10 awards for the past 3 years and it has been offering the face-to-face classes in their review program for aspiring psychometricians. This 2018, RGO offered a home-based study program and delivered online. The study examined the perception of students enrolled in the said distance learning review program for aspiring psychometricians by RGO Review Center using a survey questionnaire partially adopted from Alam, Waqar, Zaman, Shehzadi, and Mehmood (2012) to provide a better understanding to predict student satisfaction, especially in online learning environments.

Keywords: *perception, distance education, open and distance learning, review center, Philippines*

Introduction

Evolutions in communications technology have made drastic differences in our society for the past few decades, changing even educational horizons. One change we see now is education which we have been talked about for some time now. This gave birth to a new form of education we now call distance education. Distance education is defined by Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, and Zvacek (2008) as education having a distance: distance being geographical distance, time distance, or even intellectual distance. Furthermore, Schlosser and Simonson (2006) define distance education as an "institution-based, formal education where the learning group is separated, and where interactive telecommunications systems are used to connect learners, resources, and instructors" (as cited in Simonson,2003, p. 216), as such, distance education overcomes challenges posed by geographical, time, and intellect distance.

Simonson, et al. (2008) discussed Dan Coldeway's framework that differentiates the practice of education in four ways: same-time and same-place education, same-time and different-place education, different-time and same-place education, and different-time and different-place education. According to Simonson, distance education occurs when the geographical distance is present, such as in the two remaining practices of education: same-time and different-place education, and different-time and different-place education. Same-time and different-place education, also known as synchronous distance education, occurs when a distance education

topic is delivered through media that allows communication at the same time, such as video conferencing, long-distance calling, and chatting. On the other hand, asynchronous distance education is characterized by having a different-time and different place process of education. This can be done through discussion forums, uploaded educational materials such as documents, videos, and recordings, among others, made available to be accessed by the learners any time at any place (Simonson, et al., 2008).

There are certain factors as to why students enroll in a course offered via distance education. For example, Messo (2014) surveyed 305 participants and found out that most of them would like to self-study, while the second reason was due to time constraints, and the least was due to schedule issues. Another research by Alam, Waqar, Zaman, Shehzadi, and Mehmood (2012) found out that students chose distance education due to work commitments while closing in with the flexibility of time and location at the second.

Telecommunications evolution provided avenues for Filipinos to learn from others even at a distance. Bandalaria (2007) wrote about the development of open and distance learning in the Philippines that was divided into four generations, characterized by the different technological advancements within each epoch: (1) first-generation DE via radio technology; (2) print-based materials with supplementary, non-compulsory face-to-face classes and/or with instructional content via radio; (3) print-based materials and pre-recorded supplementary audio or video materials; and lastly and currently, (4) fourth-generation DE via different affordances (e.g., discussion forums, chats, Web-browsing) made possible by the internet.

There are certain ideas surrounding the definition of perception, especially when applied in various fields. However, we can define perception as the constructive lens people use as they see a certain thing which clearly affects how they perceive that certain thing (Schmitz, 2012, Creative Commons). Moreover, perception is defined by Messo (2014, p. 119) as "an idea, a belief or an image one has as a result of how he/she sees or understands something." Perception, however, shall be noted by the context as told by Isman, Dabaj, Altinay, Z., and Altinay, F. (2004) since it can be influenced by different factors which can mainly be gender, demographic, and psychographic considerations.

Perception studies in distance education have been done in various countries and universities. In 2008, Sahin and Shelley studied and considered the students' perceptions in the case of student satisfaction of distance education students and found out that computer knowledge and attitudinal factors affect student satisfaction in distance education and that if computer knowledge is inadequate, students might not be satisfied with the quality and appropriateness of education. Another study by Schifter (2002) found out that faculty, motivated by intrinsic motivations such as job satisfaction, contributes much to the success of a distance education program. Messo (2014) found out that there is a question of quality in open and distance learning in Tanzania due to the results of his study that some learners had positive perception of the registration, quality of course materials, clear syllabi and course objectives, and access to their instructors but, on the other hand, had negative perceptions about the sufficiency and timely delivery of educational materials, quality of interaction and interactivity, access to internet services, and staffing.

With these researches, we can see that perception studies in distance education varies in results due to the variety of how the management of distance education institution handles it, considering

distance education is viewed as a system, and because of some considerations such as gender, demographics, and psychographics.

In 2007, the Philippines' Commission on Higher Education (CHED, 2007, p. 2) defined review centers as a study center "…that is intended to refresh and enhance the knowledge or competencies and skills of reviewees obtained in the formal school setting in preparation for the licensure examinations given by the Professional Regulation Commission (PRC)."

There is limited literature concerning review centers, even in the Philippines where there are many review centers offering programs in accordance with the licensing policies of the PRC, the government agency established to assess and give qualified people the authority to practice their profession in accordance to the law.

One review center in the Philippines, the Review for Global Opportunities (RGO), was established in 2006 and shifted focus in 2014 to their psychology program or, specifically, their review for psychometricians. In a span of 4 years, they have already established themselves as the leading provider of the psychometrician review program in the Philippines, garnering awards and registering 88 top-notchers for the Board Licensure Examination for Professional Psychometricians (BLEPP) to their name. This 2018, RGO offered its first distance education review program to cater to the needs of the markets especially for those students who are traveling for just to attend review classes and those who have commitments that limit them to attend physical attend classes for a minimum of 16 hours per week.

The pilot distance education review program of RGO was done through print-based materials and online education. Their print-based materials are composed of examinations and books which were adopted from their face-to-face review program that they started offering since 2014 while their online education is situated in Facebook where students are given live and recorded videos of their face-to-face classes, and uploaded online review materials such as review notes, mock examinations and their respective exam keys for self-checking.

Objectives

Having a pilot program certainly needs to have an analysis of its strengths and weakness, especially on the perceptions of its students. Thus, we adopted some research questions from Alam et al. (2012) towards understanding students' perception of the effectiveness of the review and predict student satisfaction given their online learning environment:

1. What demographic characteristics exist for distance learners?
2. Why did students choose the distance learning mode formats?
3. What are the student perceptions of teaching by distance?
4. What are the student perceptions of learning by distance?
5. What are the student perceptions of learner support services?
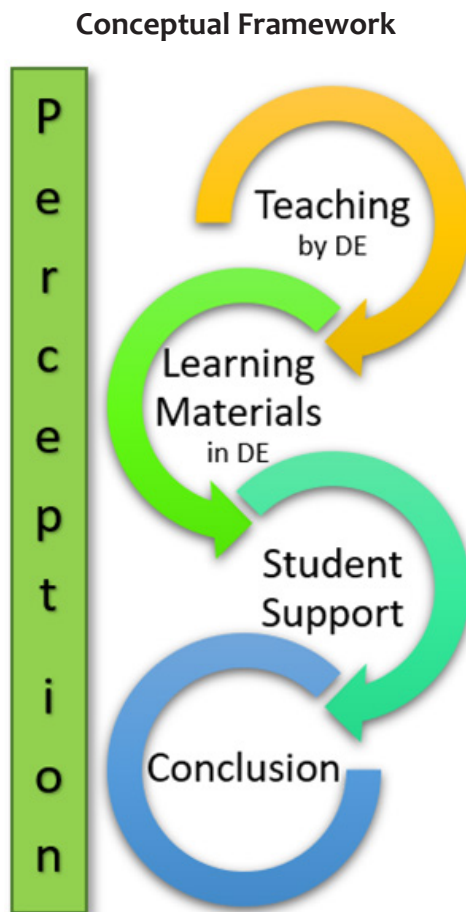
Conceptual Framework

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

This research exposes the perceptions of students in three different points of distance education: teaching, learning materials, and student support. With their answers, we arrive to the conclusion towards a better understanding of student satisfaction and provide a better distance education experience in the next implementations of the distance education review program.

Methodology

A survey questionnaire was posted in the exclusive Facebook group where the members are only the students enrolled in the said distance education review program. Therefore, this research adopted a survey research method in order to understand the heart of the sample. Kraemer (1991, as cited in Glasow, 2005) says that there are three characteristics of survey research: quantitatively describe specific aspects in a population; subjective data are collected from the sample and uses a selected portion, or a sample of the population that enables the findings to become generalized to the population. The design seemed appropriate since the samples are geographically distributed across the Philippines, and only accesses the review program online.

The study was conducted in August 2018 to October 2018. This period seemed to be a great time to ask the students of their experiences about the review program because they are already halfway through and their board exams are drawing nearer.

Results and Discussions

There are currently 184 students enrolled in the program. However, there are 3 inactive accounts of their students inside the exclusive Facebook group which lowers the intended sample size down to 181. Out of the 181 eligible samples, only 23 responded to the survey.

A.) Demographics

The respondents of the study are predominantly females because the enrolled students are also of those statistics (Table 1). Also, most of the reviewees are in the range of 20-29 years old due to being fresh graduates. Fresh graduates are those who just recently graduated in the same year as of writing (i.e. graduates of 2018). However, there would be some students who are not fresh graduates because the BLEPP was only first given in 2015 and did not have the chance to take it immediately after they graduated. This also explains the domination of the respondents who are single than married. Being dominated by fresh graduates, they would only have the minimum work experience or no work experience at all, or only below the six to nine years range of work experience.

Table 1. Demographics of the Respondents

Biological Sex	
Male	2
Female	21
Age	
20-29 years old	21
30-39 years old	2
Marital Status	
Single	19
Married	4
Work Experience	
0-2 years	15
3-5 years	6
6-9 years	1
10 years and above	1
N = 23	

There are various reasons of students to choose distance education rather than having face-to-face classes. In the given survey, five reasons of which they can choose one or more that applies to them. Most of the participants said that they have chosen to enroll in a distance education program due to the flexibility of time and location. As such, 16 or 69.6% of the sample have chosen the said reason. Coming in second was due to their work commitments. Twelve (12) or 52.2% of the participants said that they chose distance education because they had something that occupies a big chunk of their time which is work. Next is due to their family commitments. Family commitments are those commitments that are "familial" in nature or something that stems in the family (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, n.d., as cited in Mental Health America of Northern Kentucky & Southwest Ohio, n.d). Eight (8) respondents or 34.8% said that they had these types

of commitments that made them choose the distance education program. The last in the given choices was because the requirements in distance learning are more relaxed to which three respondents selected that choice. One (1) respondent (4.3%), however, said that she chose the distance education program because of it is cheaper than the conventional face-to-face review classes offered by the same review center.

The distance learning review program offered various additional benefits aside from learning. Most of the respondents said that their reason to choose the distance learning review program was because of the flexibility of time and location. This goes consistently with Vlasenko and Bozhok (2014) that distance education closes the gap created by geographical or time concerns. Also, some have commitments of work or familial nature. These types of commitment are hard to negotiate or compromise due to their degree of responsibility. Alam et al. (2012, p. 514) also stated that "Graduate level professional schools have been particularly hard hit as many graduate students need to negotiate work and family obligations while completing their coursework." Although a review program is not considered graduate level, reviewing for a licensure exam requires a student to have been finished a degree corresponding to the license which should have provided the adequate coursework to understand or even review/refresh learning from that degree.

B.) Student perceptions of teaching by DE

In assessing the teaching process of distance education, three statements were given, and respondents were asked to respond in a Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree, with another option of not observed if the given statement were not observed during the period of the program. These three statements were:

1. The facilitator provided prompt feedback on my assignments.
2. The facilitator used the relevant instructional medium.
3. The content of the sessions met my expectations.

The group of respondents was torn towards receiving prompt feedback as this is subjective. However, the exams were given as early as students enrolled and feedback was just given after a few months. This long waiting may have resulted into only 12 respondents agreeing that this is a prompt feedback, while 11 respondents were either neutral or disagree towards promptness.

Most students agree that the instructional medium was relevant. This is because they were given print-based materials such as books and mock examinations and were given additional video lectures and uploaded materials. Being in a distance learning program requires a high degree of independence, especially in learning which might have been understood by the students.

Eighteen (18) respondents agree that the content given met their expectations because study materials have a high degree of self-explanation. However, the five respondents who disagreed might seem to have not expected that the videos would only be live rather than pre-recorded videos that are adjusted for distance learners who do not have the luxury of time to watch hour-long videos like the live videos given to them (Table 2).

Table 2. Student Perceptions of Teaching in Distance Education Mode

Responses	The facilitator provided prompt feedback on my assignments		The facilitator used the relevant instructional medium		The content of the sessions met my expectations	
Strongly Agree	2	8.7%	8	34.8%	5	21.7%
Agree	10	43.5%	14	60.9%	13	56.5%
Neutral	8	34.8%	1	4.3%	1	4.3%
Disagree	1	4.3%	0	0.0%	4	17.4%
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Not Observed	2	8.7%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
N = 23						

C.) Perceptions of DE learners towards learning material

There were four statements given to measure the respondents' perceptions of the learning materials given in the distance education program. These statements were not just about the materials, but also the affordances used, and the workload given on the program. The given statements are:

1. Learning materials were self-explanatory
2. Group discussions were found useful
3. Use of computer and internet increased
4. The workload in the program was too much

As seen in Table 3, there are a total of 16 respondents who agreed that the learning materials were self-explanatory. However, the remaining seven respondents might have experienced difficulty in understanding the learning materials especially the online ones. Most of the learning materials were in an examination form, to which they would answer. However, most of the exams do not have any concrete instructions and just consisted of questions about the certain subject. Also, the uploaded notes and live videos only had their title, and the only instruction given was to read them or watch them.

The agreement of some of the respondents regarding group discussions might have resulted into seeing the question and answer part on the comments on the post. However, there was not any group discussion aside from student-prompted questions. The review program did not formally include any group discussion or points of interaction between lecturers and students, but they provided an avenue for the students to ask and receive answers from the lecturers. This situation explains the conflict on the opinions of the respondents.

The majority of the respondents agreed that their computer and internet usage increased due to their enrollment of the program. The given higher responsibility to study creates a need for them to use the computer and internet to maximize their learning towards being ready for the board examinations.

Students enrolled in the program were given drill questions to train their mental stamina and improve cognitive knowledge. However, this might have posed a problem towards the two respondents who strongly agreed that the workload was too much. Most of the respondents, however, did not agree that the workload was too much. The review center lacked instructions or a schedule that will serve as a guide for the students as to when they should answer and/or study the drill questions, which might have resulted in students doing much of a workload at a time than having it on a schedule to avoid workload congestion resulting in a heavy cognitive load.

Table 4. Perception of student support services in distance learning

Responses	I received enough information from RGO about my study		I received prompt feedback about my inquiries on the program of study		There are enough study facilities to help with my program	
Strongly Agree	5	21.7%	6	26.1%	5	21.7%
Agree	12	52.2%	11	47.8%	12	52.2%
Neutral	6	26.1%	3	13.0%	3	13.0%
Disagree	0	0.0%	3	13.0%	3	13.0%
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Not Observed	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
N = 23						

Conclusion and Recommendations

The results of the study reveal that there is much to be learned about the difference between the system of a review center and a formal educational institution that offers distance education. The program might have seemed preferred by young individuals and those who have been in their own industries for quite some time. However, the circumstances surrounding the psychology program such as having more female practitioners than male practitioners, and the preference of the younger respondents towards reviewing and taking the board exam might have largely affected the results of the study.

On the preference of the students, most of the respondents agree that distance learning offers flexibility in terms of time and location, saving them time and driving them to learn even if they

have responsibilities stemming from various sources such as work, family, and others.

There is much to improve for the review center that adopts distance education for their review program. One mistake of institutions that pilot a distance education program is the belief that they can just make materials always accessible and call it a form of distance education. However, distance education is much more than converting offline materials into online. Distance education requires planning, a systems approach, and other factors that might deviate from the current system adopted of the review center that focuses on their face-to-face review classes rather than their distance learning program that contributes least to their profit.

With these, there are a number of possibilities regarding the use of distance education. However, one must take note of their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats if ever they have started one. Distance learning, together with telecommunications evolution, has been through the test of time to be regarded as one field of study; some even say that it can replace current educational practices that have been practiced for most of our history. This might not be a goal, but we need to take note of the perceptions of our students regarding teaching, learning, educational materials, and student support. All these things go together towards a successful distance education program that is cost-effective, efficient, and most importantly, effective.

Implementing a pilot review program via distance education, just like any other programs that are new, exposes a lot of room for improvement. Thus, there are seven recommendations that the researcher provides to increase student satisfaction for the upcoming implementations of the said review via distance education:

1. Establish learning plan or learning schedule for students that can elaborate on what week they should answer a certain exam and study a certain material. This calls for us to segregate files not only by lecturer, but also by week to let the students know what they should study at the time.
2. Give prompt feedback especially answers to drills. This can be done through uploading self-grading assessments.
3. Although there is a respect for the intellectual property rights, lecturers shall agree for their materials and presentations to be downloaded by the students. Lecturers can set PowerPoint presentations in .ppsx form and documents to .pdf and lock copying and pasting methods to ensure that their materials are only in read-only mode.
4. Group discussion, even in asynchronous form, shall happen. This closes the gap between the advantage that face-to-face students have by asking the lecturer questions and the home-based student to ask the same question to the lecturer. Although this is possible by private message, it is better if the answer is shared to all members of the group.
5. Learner support that includes step-by-step registration and enrollment, how to learn successfully via distance education, and transferring from face-to-face review to home-based review shall be clear to all learners, administration, and coordinators (for transferring).

Distance education can be and has been applied to a plethora of contexts. However, this study found out that there are some contexts that are still lacking in literature which still needs to be sought. Hence, the researcher recommends the following research in the future:

1. Study on the management in terms of business, education, and other applicable fields of study (i.e. motivation theory) in the context of review centers that offer reviews for various professional eligibility exams;
2. Quality assurance in distance education of other educational institutions especially review centers; and
3. Comparative study between the implementation of DE between different learning contexts including higher education institutions (HEIs) and review centers.

Review centers, just like any other HEIs, create their own brand of education that it can be studied as to what is common within every review center especially in the context of education.

Various distance-learning programs are already everywhere, and some of which are still on their trial and error period. while other educational institutions are thinking that their program is enough where in fact they might be missing the point of education. These are the reasons why the researcher sees the importance of further studies towards the management, quality assurance, and comparative analyses that can give light to an educational service that has been present in the Philippines for a long time and that was seldom written about.

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