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Investing in e-learning, future

By: Tish Martinez-Castillo - @inquirerdotnet Philippine Daily Inquirer / 12:39 AM October 30, 2011

Students must have access to computers and broadband Internet to benefit from e-learning. Contributed Photo

Technology has made almost every experience virtual—from making friends and talking with them to doing business with other people. Education has followed suit with e-learning.

Today's learners are tech-savvy digital natives—mobile phone toting, Internet surfing and RPG-game playing youngsters.

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Steve Jobs, Apple cofounder and former CEO, was one of the first to recognize these digital natives. Apple content-creation tools for education—GarageBand, iMovie and iWork as well as podcasts and apps on virtually every subject matter—are fostering creativity and innovation in classrooms across the globe.

"The global outpouring of grief reflects Jobs' impact on modern life. He blazed trails in education and understood that today's learners grasp new technologies intuitively," says Jose Maria T. Policarpio, executive director of education publisher Diwa Learning Systems Inc.

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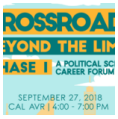
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Policarpio adds that tapping this intuition is key to helping students perform better academically. “We have to remember, they learn differently and we need to adapt our modes of teaching.”

DepEd strategy plan

The Department of Education (DepEd) put emphasis on the need to develop e-learning via its five-year Information and Communication Technology for Education (ICT4E) Strategy Plan. ICT4E aims to integrate ICT into every school’s curricula, develop programs, establish infrastructure and come up with a system for evaluating the program’s effectiveness. DepEd has also strove to strengthen its Educational Technology Unit and conduct literacy training among teachers.

Two years ago, more than 6,600 schools participated in DepEd’s Internet Connectivity Project. During that time, only 1,936 schools had Internet access. Today, more than 3,127 schools are connected.

Low student-computer and teacher-computer ratios pose the biggest challenge to the program, according to an education department report on ICT4E.

Infrastructure and teacher competencies are also areas of concern as computer literacy is not a requirement for teacher certification and licensure. But despite all this, the department remains optimistic about the ICT4E program, saying that “meeting challenges by using the tools available creatively is key to effectively integrating ICT.”

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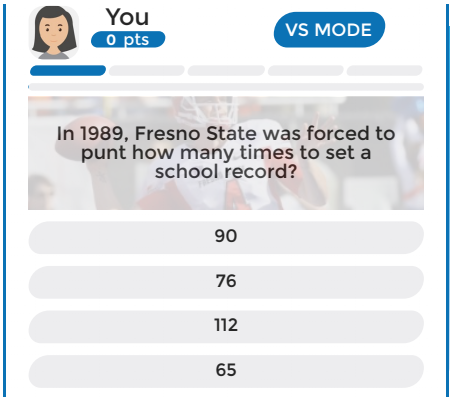
Private sector

DepEd also encourages businesses and other organizations to share their expertise. To date, more than 10,000 teachers have undergone digital-literacy training in partnership with the private sector. The ReImaginED Executive Training, a series of consultations and workshops to help division and regional education administrators use the ICT4E program, is also being implemented.

With close to 13 million elementary students and some 5.4 million high-school students bearing the brunt of dwindling national budget allocations



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and with educators leaving the country to teach abroad, the increase in private-sector support for the country's public-education system comes at a propitious time.

Everyone's concern

As the country struggles to keep the deadline set by the UN-led Millennium Development Goals program, assistance from other sectors has become vital, according to Education Secretary Armin Luistro.

"Education isn't an isolated concern. It is everyone's concern," says Luistro.

At the Technology Forum on e-Learning early this year at the Asian Institute of Management, Batobalani Foundation Inc. (BBFI) presented its vision for deepening public- and private-sector partnerships for education. BBFI seeks to address the lack of textbooks and other resources for basic education.

Inexpensive

"E-learning is the easiest and most inexpensive way to transfer knowledge," says Batobalani Foundation chair Saturnino G. Belen Jr. "We don't need to reinvent the wheel to apply these technologies. For ICT especially, the private sector is in a better position to take up these initiatives because it has the expertise. You have to have hardware, connectivity, content and also training."

BBFI has been pushing the e-learning agenda with various programs, foremost of which is Genyo, an online learning-management system from Diwa Learning Systems Inc. "We want to let people know about the success stories of e-learning, communicate the idea to policymakers that what we would like is for them to support our efforts in bringing e-learning to public schools," adds Belen.

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He enumerates the advantages of this partnership. "There is efficiency in cost and effort. We avoid duplicating work and we also ensure the sustainability of projects when the private sector is involved."

Members of the private sector are already heavily invested in e-learning. Digital versions of textbooks, educational magazines and television programs are now available for basic education. e-learning portals and online management programs for students and teachers have also been made available.

Teaching today's learners has become more challenging because technology is fast evolving, according to Policarpio. "Think of it this way. We are

is fast evolving, according to Policarpio. "Think of it this way: We are preparing them for jobs that don't yet exist and for technologies that haven't been invented," he says.

While universities in the country and abroad have integrated ICT into their curricula, Policarpio says there's a big difference between accessing resources over the Internet and e-learning.

"For example, Harvard and Yale have an online portal for learning—a place where they can share their lectures and reports online. But those are just resources anyone can access," says Policarpio. "e-learning goes beyond that. It melds all kinds of academic activities with ICT."

Accessible degrees

As more Asian professionals seek advanced degrees, the demand for institutions to offer a wider array of courses under their distance-education programs has also increased.

The number of open universities and institutions in Asia has grown exponentially, with China and India leading the sector's ranks. The availability of fast broadband Internet in South Korea, Japan, Hong Kong and Singapore has also contributed to the rapid growth of online learning in the region.

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People holding full-time jobs prefer online education because it doesn't require them to attend classes on a physical campus.

"Many working adults simply do not have the time to attend face-to-face lectures delivered in conventional universities," says Wong Tat Meng, president of the Asian Association of Open Universities. "Also, governments simply cannot build sufficient brick-and-mortar universities fast enough to meet the huge demand for knowledge workers needed to drive the knowledge economy.

In a recent interview with the New York Times, Wong, also vice chancellor of Malaysia's Wawasan Open University, says that geography has become less of a factor in pursuing a degree and that the Internet has "taken the 'distance' out of distance education."

Asia e University

The demand for better higher education has led to the establishment of the Asia e University in 2008. Made up of 31 member-countries under the Asia Cooperation Dialogue, the university has 3,000 students enrolled in its postgraduate, undergraduate and executive programs.

postgraduate, undergraduate and executive programs.

Despite the upswing in distance education, some critics argue that online learning may not be enough to bridge Asia's tertiary education gap.

In "The Innovative University: Changing the DNA of Higher Education from the Inside Out," authors Clayton M. Christensen and Henry J. Eyring point out that the increase in the number of institutions offering degrees online does not guarantee the increase in competent graduates.

National Open University

Experts also suggest that inferior Internet service in many parts of Asia discourage potential students from getting their degrees online.

In the Philippines, House Bill No. 4883, which seeks to declare the University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU) the national Open University of the Philippines has reached its final reading in the House of Representatives.

Also known as the "Open Learning and Distance Education Act of 2011," it seeks to make distance learning more accessible to Filipinos and to institute policies that ensure the quality of these distance-education programs.

Under HB 4883, the Commission on Higher Education and the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority will regulate the distance-education programs offered by secondary schools. The development of new programs will be led by UPOU.

Other tertiary institutions in the country offering distance-learning programs include the Philippine Women's University (PWU), De La Salle University, Polytechnic University of the Philippines and the Pamantasan ng Lungsod ng Maynila.

Six characteristics

However, despite these initiatives, many are still at a loss on what e-learning and ICT integrated education are. In 2001, Louis Bonder of the University of Amsterdam, presented six key characteristics of e-learning:

Digitization of course materials

Delivery of the materials regardless of the learner's location

Learner studying at his or her own pace

Information must be free-flowing

Platforms must be interactive

Learning must be collaborative

In the Philippines, a number of e-learning products and services are available. These include libraries where students can access the Online

Public Access Catalog to locate the physical copies of the references they need, public domain reference collections and online encyclopedias.

Online coursework

To support their open university and distance-learning programs, UP and the PWU have made content and coursework available online. Leading IT companies such as Microsoft, Intel and Oracle have also partnered with DepEd to provide management tools and resources for teachers.

While many private grade schools and high schools such as Don Bosco, Lourdes School of Mandaluyong, Hope Christian School, First Asia Institute of Technology and Huamanities and Saint Paul University Philippines have successfully integrated ICT into their lessons, public basic education is still lagging behind.

Changing mindset

Felix Librero of UPOU says that aside from infrastructure and teacher-training difficulties, the most serious hurdle e-learning in the country faces is the mindset. In a paper he presented at the Symposium on Digital Learning in Keio University, Japan, he says that "most of our teachers, policy makers and decision makers are still steeped in the conventional learning norm, that is teacher-centered learning."

Librero says that "as long as they remain convinced that we should not shift to a learner-centered (student-centered) mindset, digital learning will simply remain a good idea and learners who've been used to traditional methods must be ready to take responsibility for their learning in an ICT integrated classroom."

(Martinez-Castillo, an Ateneo de Manila University graduate, major in European languages, works for RubyComm-K. Austria Public Relations Consultants.)

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