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Reflecting on Teaching and Learning-Implications for VET Practice, Post COVID-19 Pandemic

Abstract

These are uncertain times, and this uncertainty is being particularly felt in the world of education. We have seen unprecedented global closures of schools, colleges and universities, all of which have directly impacted on the way we now conceptualise the practice of teaching and learning. As the world responds to concatenated waves of technological innovation, adult learners in all areas will need to take a more active role in their own learning, with programme designers placing them at the centre of their human capability development interventions (Albrahim 2020). This paper explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on ‘educators’ and ‘trainers’ across the Further Education and Training sector in Indonesia as a result of the rapid deployment of e-learning. The discussion will further examine the expansion of communities of practice, and undertake an assessment of institutional support provisioned to move learning to an online context. It will particularly explore participant responses to the technical challenges faced by educators and learners transitioning to e-learning. Finally, the authors investigate the nature of the paradigm shift required at an institutional level to ensure appropriate future development of an agile and responsive Indonesian administrative management and special technological support infrastructure requirements (Kardinasari 2015).

Keywords: Human capability development, student centred learning, communities of practice.

1 Introduction Culture in Context

This paper acknowledges and recognises that collaborative approaches are seen to be transparently applicable in an Indonesian context, and that lifelong learning and continual reskilling will become the new normal as rapid change impacts on all areas of learning, particularly as modern education and labour market policies focus on ‘enhancing the ability to adapt to an ever-changing marketplace’ (Stiglitz & Greenwald 2015, 56). In this respect, the cultural mores at the local site of the intervention and the national principles affected by the investigations should be respected and addressed (Sayuti 2016). As a result, Indonesian human capability development programmes of the ‘Guru-centred’ style, are unlikely to be compatible with modern educational purposes. This suggests that Indonesia, like many developing countries, should be encouraged to move towards a more ‘student-centred’ approach (Siswati 2019), the implications of which are that trainers and educators will be mentors, coaches and guides rather than teachers and instructors (Jones 2006). Stiglitz et al. (2015) stated that ‘we learn by doing, that what we do and how we do it affects what we learn

and the evolution of our economy and society' (Stiglitz & Greenwald 2015, 51). With this foremost in our minds, the learning styles and training approaches of practitioners across the tertiary education sector, particularly with regard to training practitioners in the National Institute of Public Administration (NIPA), require further analysis. The respondents' comments provided a useful level of critique of learning approaches across the institutes under examination, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. These reflections provided a means of reviewing existing approaches, the human capability requirements to meet the demands of e-learning, and management practices appropriate for education and training settings. It may take quite some time for the implications and impact of these findings to be realised by Indonesian society.

In order to make training relevant to trainees' unique cultures and diversity, it was essential to develop an understanding of the divergent training needs of NIPA participants. Traditional educational approaches are being replaced by advanced simulation, artificial intelligence and an array of new technologies - the implementation and acceptance of which have been accelerated by COVID-19. Many countries are grappling with determining relevant technological graduate competencies. Indonesian university graduates, according to Oey et al. (2017), concluded that, in facing increased levels of digital technology and automation in the near future, every graduate should develop several key capabilities including: (i) critical thinking, creativity, innovation and sensitivity to a range of challenging circumstances and be able to respond with an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approach; (ii) the ability to apply informational communication technology including basic computer skills such as word processing, spreadsheets, and PowerPoint presentations, allied to basic research capabilities; (iii) the ability to be inclusive of cultural divergence and receptive to the values of other cultures, ethnic groups, race and religions; (iv) an aptitude to develop teams and conduct negotiations, including the sharing of knowledge with others; (v) developing effective communication through various forms of information technologies; (vi) the capacity to think globally whilst acting locally and collaborating internationally; (vii) the ability to collect, process and analyse data in order to support quality decision making; and (viii) exhibiting citizenship in an Indonesian context, by understanding the history and goals of national identities in Indonesia, including its diverse manifestations of local wisdoms, traditions and cultures (Oey et al. 2017).

There is a strong emphasis on 'soft skills' development in Oey's typology of tertiary graduate skills. Currently, society is going through significant social and political reconstruction, making the task of selecting appropriate skills even more challenging. Ra et al. (2019) claimed that soft skills will be just as important as 'higher order cognitive skills' and stressed the importance of 'learnability' a willingness and ability to unlearn, learn and relearn (Ra et al. 2019). Ra, Jagannathan and Maclean (2021) noted that learnability is critical for individuals to adapt to the emerging needs of the economy and society as they navigate their lives (Ra, Jagannathan, & Maclean 2021, 16). Whilst some of these capabilities are somewhat generic to university graduates around the world, especially when it comes to innovation, Sayuti and Mujiarto note that greater emphasis is required in developing 'pedagogy and

learning approaches that enable critical thinking, innovation and creativity’ (Sayuti & Mujiarto 2018) in the Indonesian educational context. In highlighting the need for Indonesian graduates to develop human capabilities of inclusive cultural diversity, learnability and national identity, this paper explores the challenges associated with their introduction in an online e-learning environment.

The Government of Indonesia’s Ministry of Empowerment of State Apparatus and Bureaucratic Reform (Kemenpan and RB), regulates competency standards for government officials and public servants in Indonesia through Regulation No. 38/2018 on Competency Standards for Government Official Positions (Standar Kompetensi Jabatan ASN). The term ‘competency standard’ describes the knowledge, skills and attitudes that government officials need to perform their duties and respond to their job requirements in an appropriate manner. There are three types of competency standards for government officials: (i) Managerial Competencies, which are the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that can be observed, measured and developed to lead and/or manage an organisation; (ii) Technical Competencies, which are the specific knowledge, skills and attitudes that can be observed, measured and developed in relation to a role; and (iii) Social and Cultural Competencies. According to Regulation No 38/2018, these social and cultural competencies are specific knowledge, skills and attitudes that can be observed, measured and developed as they relate to experiences with multicultural society in term of religions, ethnicity and culture, behaviours, nationalism, ethics, values, morals, emotions and principles. These human capabilities have to be fulfilled by all government officials in the performance of their duties. This paper examines the last of these national competency standards, the social and cultural competencies.

2 Workforce Considerations

The NIPA trainers interviewed for this study commented that ‘classical’ training provides opportunities to examine, explore, and engage in the development of social and cultural competencies. In traditional, face-to-face ‘classical’ training contexts, there are considerable opportunities for personal ‘interaction’ when exploring these cultural values; however, in the online learning environment, opportunities to explore these values more directly are rare. This was articulated by one respondent, who said:

“How do we make e-training feel like classical training? We cannot interact physically, online is only the mind. Emotions come from the physical interaction of people ... when I tell my story to you right here in front of me, personally, and emotionally. Virtually we need to find other ways that are not yet clear to us.”

As this respondent has outlined, the challenge is to find ways to engage personally and emotionally in an online setting. Other trainers and facilitators articulated similar “unknowns.” We do not know: (i) how to create ‘personal’ encounters online; (ii) which approaches work best for different age groups; or (iii) which skills are required in this virtual environment. There is, perhaps, a lack of appreciation regarding the ability of the current

workforce, particularly its older members, to adjust to changing educational environments, new online e-learning platforms and unfamiliar training approaches. This problem is exacerbated by the lack of opportunities for institutional professional development programmes, which has led to individual groups of trainers creating their own ‘communities of practice’ (Lave & Wenger 1991) where participants willingly share with each other and support each other in delivering training. One respondent commented that:

“After a training workshop we use a ‘WhatsApp’ group with other trainers so they can comment on performance, what may be missing, and on what needs to be improved.”

Conducting supportive communities of practice goes some way to assisting trainers develop online teaching skills and assisting individuals to solve problems and make decisions (Dalkir 2017). Communities of practice are understood to be groups of people who share common concerns among themselves on a topic of mutual interest, and by deepening their collective knowledge and expertise through interaction with each other on an ongoing basis (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder 2002). It has been suggested that harvesting this knowledge and expertise requires interventions from the institutes involved as a means of preserving institutional knowledge (Dalkir 2017). At a minimum, these communities of practice could form the basis of sanctioned professional development programmes but, according to some of the respondents in this study, this is not the case in NIPA. Rather, they were often expected to ‘do it themselves’. It should be noted that communities of practice provide trainers with the means of control over their professional development requirements, in contrast to institutionally sanctioned professional development programmes. The latter impose pedagogy with the promise of encouraging skill restoration, solving problems or providing growth opportunities (Sparks 1994).

Successful training interventions are reliant upon individual professional learning programmes, ideally sanctioned within the institute or developed collaboratively through communities of practice which create value not just for the individual, but also for the institute. Sharma and Bindal note that effective professional development for educators leads to improved quality of teaching and positive learner outcomes (Sharma & Bindal 2013). Further, Wenger et al. (2002) identified a short term value to the organisation in the form of improved business outcomes, providing an arena for problem solving, better decision making, time and cost reductions, and the ability to take risks. Amin and Roberts (2008) added that the perceived benefits of communities of practice can be seen in the creation of a climate of innovation, particularly in the form of organisational innovation.

In addition to the *ad hoc* nature of professional development programmes in the vocational education and training arena, this study highlights the health and welfare concerns faced by trainers when moving ‘online’ to such a significant extent. These issues are noted below, collated under category headings based on the responses.

2.1 Impact on Female Trainers

The move towards ‘working from home’ and delivering training online created challenges for women trainees more than for their male counterparts. As articulated by one respondent, ‘trainers and facilitators have lives outside their working role’ and it was noted that their managers are, at times, unable to ‘see the delicacy of the problem of working from home, particularly when we have other jobs such as being a mother.’ This particular comment was reflected in a variety of ways by many of the women in this study, suggesting that little consideration was given to the stress of working from home, overlooking the ‘troubles and difficulties’ the women faced.

One male respondent noted that working from home did not present the same family issues as it did for his female colleagues. He expressed ‘sympathy’ for their circumstances, yet felt detached from the consequences. In the main, though, it was generally noted that managing family responsibilities and home duties impacts more severely on women than on men. One female respondent reported that:

“I am a woman, I am a mother, I am a wife, and these pressures sometimes build up and prevent me from performing at the highest level (in my job). The house is very small and loud, so if my microphone is on when I conduct the training programme from home, the participants can hear everything, which is disturbing.”

It is as though home life cannot be allowed to intrude upon the ‘professionalism’ expected in work situations. This attitude emerges in the discussions as the ‘participants view’ of what constitutes professionalism. A natural response to this attitude is that there is pressure to maintain professionalism. In many East Asian cultures, the phenomenon of ‘saving face’ (Minkov & Hofstede 2012) is not uncommon and this perspective is equally apparent in Indonesia. This situation impacts on an individual learner’s sense of worth, forming a power differential in the individual’s relationship with teachers and lecturers. It would appear that this issue requires greater consideration from managers and participants regarding the family life circumstances that may impact on ‘working from home’. This includes such considerations as: (i) hours of work and availability; (ii) support in managing work requirements; and (iii) varying the levels of support according to ‘age’, ‘seniority’ and ‘region’.

2.2 Age and Seniority

Pruetipibultham (2012) noted that in Indonesia, particularly in Javanese culture, deference toward age, position, status and gender (male) exists, which is illustrated through culturally respectful language directed towards older males in positions of authority. The impact of this deference in training situations was that trainers were required to be cognisant and respectful of diversity within Indonesian culture. Facilitators are challenged in expressing the dichotomy between communicating ‘equality and openness’ whilst simultaneously showing ‘respect’ and honouring ‘status’. In Javanese culture, showing positional appropriateness, reflected through respectful behaviours and communication, is essential (Pruetipibultham 2012). The culture of

honouring status and showing respect is illustrated by a respondent's comments on Indonesian education:

“In Indonesia it's uncommon for children to discuss with their teacher. We are changing... mostly they just sit and listen. Some teachers don't like students asking [questions] - that culture still persists now (awkward laughter).”

It was noted that people in more senior training roles were able to express their concerns more confidently to management without fear of reproach than younger, less experienced trainers. Given that the COVID-19 pandemic thrust many trainers into a 'training from home' situation, there has not been enough research into the impact of these changes on families and relationships. Further research could explore the support that trainers/facilitators would need in order to work effectively in this mode, and also examine the impact of working remotely on the health and welfare of Indonesian trainers and facilitators. The following questions could be explored: (i) What is the nature of the interaction between family commitments and their impact on work duties? (ii) What techniques are available for discharging professional duties from the office and for setting work priorities? (iii) Which channels could be used for approaching management for support and equipment, and for negotiating time management issues? and (iv) How can a trainee establish a satisfactory work-life balance, and access required welfare support needs?

3 Social and Economic Disparity

The sustainable development goals of (i) improving quality education, (ii) maintaining decent work conditions and economic growth, and (iii) significantly reducing inequality, have all been impacted to a large extent by the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been noted that the World Bank estimates that millions of people may be forced into poverty by the economic crisis (Gulseven et al. 2020). A world moving toward online education requires equal and fair access to educational technologies. Failing to provide this valuable infrastructure is likely to perpetuate social and economic disadvantage. Unstable and unreliable internet connectivity across many areas causes widespread disparity in access to training, with many respondents bemoaning inadequate electricity supplies. Indeed, a recent South Asian study noted that many countries across the region still do not have full access to electricity (Chaudhary & Dhakal 2021). Students from poorer or remote communities are at a constant and severe disadvantage. One respondent commented that 'I cannot imagine how our students living in villages and remote communities adapt when they experience this problem.'

Internet connectivity issues were manifested in a number of unusual ways. One respondent said that connectivity and internet access continually impacts on how participants feel about their learning. This person suggested that the perception of other participants was somehow linked to the 'quality' of internet provision. When encountering poor internet connections 'the participants in training feel that this will embarrass them and others may laugh at them.' Internet connectivity clearly adds an additional layer of emotional stress:

“We also have the problem that the internet sometimes goes ‘on and off’ during online lessons. This leads to feelings of embarrassment and worrying that others will laugh at them. This is a serious concern. I don’t want to look bad because my connection is bad. Poor internet is a worry and can adversely affect motivation.”

Whilst these internet connectivity issues are not regarded as the individual’s fault, their unease or anxiety about how poor connections may be perceived by others becomes an issue for online delivery. Circumstances that make a person ‘look bad’ have serious consequences in an Indonesian context and should clearly be avoided. The impact remains significant, regardless of whether the individual has any control over the situation. Beyond the external conditions of connectivity and internet access, participants might also be subjected to subtle forms of bullying, associated with the computers they are using. When an individual’s computer lags behind or continually disrupts the online learning experience for other participants, detrimental comments may be directed at the participant:

“Sometimes the laptop they have does not support them, sometimes their work colleagues say “Buy a new one please.” This is a very subtle form of bullying, I think. We cannot introduce online learning until we think about the human and cultural aspects of using this technology.”

Putting pressure on individuals, families and communities to purchase new computer hardware is a subtle form of bullying and is undeniably discriminative. Respondents commented that the potential exists to discriminate between groups of people, maintaining that the dependence on technology to deliver training programmes perpetuates inequity, whilst equally being an obstruction to attaining sustainable development goals. This was expressed as ‘we are not growing together’ and we are ‘discriminating between groups of people.’ Whether this is an urban/rural distinction or a socio-economic one, it was nevertheless summed up by one respondent as a distinction between the ‘haves and the have nots’. The post COVID-19 pandemic phase will require governments and the international community to invest in quality education and innovative technical solutions to ensure that economic growth is shared by all (Corlatean 2020).

Poorer communities impacted by the lack of infrastructure and connectivity are restricted in their ability to engage in the e-learning education environment. In this respect, reliable infrastructure is critical for economic growth and society’s well-being (Gulseven et al. 2020). The immediacy and urgency of ‘going online’, due in part to the COVID-19 pandemic, has heightened the level of social and economic disparities, and has highlighted the need for policy makers and government officials to address these concerns (Nerini et al. 2020; Subrahmanyam & Elson-Rogers 2022). Whilst the Government of Indonesia has provided funding to educational institutions for individuals to access the internet, as has been noted on numerous occasions during this study, it is not the funding so much as the matter of access to a reliable service provider. This issue falls into the separate hands of the known internet providers:

“Teaching can be done online if you have the infrastructure supporting you; if you don’t have the infrastructure, you have to conduct it classically... we don’t have enough infrastructure at home, internet is still very expensive and unstable, no working table, no work chair. It all obstructs proper work. I can imagine other participants have similar problems.”

Rahayu reported that inadequate bandwidth in regional centres across Indonesia hindered higher education staff in the academic pursuit of online teaching (Rahayu 2019). This study found that many students in rural and remote communities suffered not only from poor internet connectivity, but in some instances had no power at all:

“The social and economic conditions of our students are very diverse [so] it becomes very challenging... some students don’t even have electricity at home ...we can provide high speed internet inside the campus, but outside our students rely on internet providers and these are not reliable. This is very challenging and frustrating at the same time.”

Clearly, institutions pursuing online e-learning methodologies have to provide alternative means of reaching these disengaged communities. This cannot just be in relation to studies on campus, since nearly 60% of students studying in the Malang State Polytechnic come from rural communities around Malang. It was noted that internet connectivity was poor in the city of Malang and possibly even more problematic in rural communities.

This research revealed that in the haste to go ‘online’ during the COVID-19 period, little consideration was given to how poorer communities might be able to seek an alternate means of learning. Ideas presented in this study included: (i) asynchronistic learning where individuals can download and print student learning materials; (ii) reducing the number of video lessons and providing *YouTube* videos for instruction in reducing data usage; and (iii) re-structuring engagement time and allowing flexibility and agility to determine internet engagement for students whilst also impacting on teachers and management. Whilst these approaches go some way towards improving the way e-learning could occur, they still place demands on poorer communities to stay connected. In addition, it puts an added burden upon those students who cannot afford to spend their own money on printing and internet access costs.

The Government of Indonesia offers funding to institutions to subsidise access for rural communities through the provision of data packages. This goes some way to alleviate the burden faced by the rural poor. However as previously noted, far more is required. Corlatean (2020) pointed out that there are many risks, challenges and inequities associated with a rapid move to online learning, and these will impact on attempts to meet sustainable development goals. This may require a significant realignment of infrastructure to meet the demands of poorer rural communities, and governments and policy makers the world over will be required to demonstrate greater political will (Corlatean 2020).

Where access to the internet was of concern to the participants in this study, there was uniform agreement on the potential benefits of an asynchronistic learning approach with a ‘step-by-step’ course structure built on activities related to knowledge and skills. Whilst it is deemed complex and challenging to deliver values-based educational experiences in an online teaching environment, this is of critical importance. Finding the best ways to achieve ‘values’ education remains the challenge. More could be done to develop case studies, role plays, and ‘scenario and hypotheticals’ around managing value-based scenarios covering issues such as: (i) attitudes to the outer islands of Indonesia; (ii) unity and diversity; (iii) the *One nation Many peoples* philosophy; (iv) governance; and (v) human rights and economic rights.

Notwithstanding these provisions, difficult questions remain: (i) What ‘alternative methods’ might exist? (ii) What regional adjustments can be provided for engaging with disadvantaged communities? and (iii) How might institutions provide these approaches, whilst meeting the requirements of a centralised education and training system? Further research is required to determine which approaches are available to help poorer communities respond to online education and, ultimately, to determine how ‘power and control’ might be provided to these disadvantaged communities.

4 Closing Remarks

Developing a culture of reflective practice is urgently needed by trainers and educators within the sector. To ensure its successful implementation, it should also be encouraged and professionally embraced as best practice. Vocational educators must consider how they can facilitate student learnability, provide culturally safe learning environments, and be empathetic to the many technological constraints evident in remote communities and multi-generational households. A willingness to engage in culturally challenging and confrontational exchanges is also required to create greater authenticity in human capability interventions. The authors contend that closer engagement with industry and community is needed not only to shape training interventions more effectively, but also to foster contextualisation, reasonable adjustment and to inform curriculum development. Agility and flexibility are key to ensuring that work-ready outcomes are realised and that programmes remain focused on the emerging needs of the economy and society.

This study has endeavoured to highlight the gaps in existing practice on an institutional level and advocate steps to shape a more agile and responsive Indonesian vocational training sector. A meaningful and reflective approach would include examining six key ideas: (a) ethical behaviour, (b) intentions, (c) recipient country consideration, (d) local consideration, (e) communities of practice, and (f) sharing (Fairman et al. 2020). Further research into the approaches required by vocational teaching staff to address the challenges faced by students learning online, particularly in relation to remote communities and practical skill development, would also prove beneficial. More investigation is needed as Indonesia begins its e-learning journey, particularly around engaging students and ensuring inclusivity both for students and facilitators.

It is worth remembering that, like many ASEAN nations, Indonesia has a rich tapestry of coexistent cultures. These cultures and traditions can shed light on much larger and complex globalised problems. The key to new and creative responses to much more significant challenges of national human capability development may well be found in these communities, villages and kampongs. An ethnically diverse nation such as Indonesia, with around 730 indigenous languages and associated ethnic groups (Tumonggor et al. 2013), brings with it centuries of culture, knowledge and a wealth of insights. All of these attributes have real value and currency and should be treasured in an increasingly homogeneous world. Indonesian multiculturalism is something to be cherished and nurtured as it could prove to be its competitive advantage with the nation seeking to transform its economy and step into the international arena.

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