Distance Education of Public School Principals:
The Experience in Bicol University, the Philippines

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Abstract

Distance education aims not to replace the traditional classroom but rather to complement and augment existing traditional mode of delivery of educational programs, thus serving as alternative mode for continuing education among working professionals. This descriptive research used both qualitative and quantitative approaches to identify and describe the experiences, problems, and insights of the learners of the SEAMEO-INNOTECH Department of Education (DepEd) ICeXCELS online class. Data were gathered through content analysis of the posts, submissions and reflection papers in the virtual platform, and from the responses during the *revalida (face-to-face panel interview of the online learners at the end of the course)* and the interview. Findings reveal that the principals considered their online learning experiences as informative, relevant, insightful and fruitful scholarly engagement with the co-learners and tutor using a novel modality of learning. The learners unanimously considered their experiences in online course favorably along content of the course, modality of learning, interaction with co-learners, interaction with the tutor, and assessment modalities or tools. Though faced with ICT problems which affected their performance, and problems regarding computerization of public schools, and work-related problems and course related problems, the principals had coping mechanisms which were helpful during and even after the online course. The insights gained are applicable to their current work as school heads, and enhanced their positive attitude towards their work and toward the teachers as their colleagues or partners in leadership. With apt actions on the problems identified, the offering of online courses to principals as alternative professional development should be sustained.

Keywords: asynchronous and synchronous discussion, continuing education, open and distance learning, school principals, ubiquitous learning

1. Introduction

The advancement in technology has paved the way to a paradigm shift in education changing significantly the delivery of education across levels and disciplines. This has given birth to distance education as it is now which in turn has led to the emergence of a borderless classroom. Distance education aims not to replace the traditional classroom but rather to complement and augment existing traditional mode of delivery of educational programs. Therefore it serves as alternative mode for continuing education among working professionals who may be hindered by geographical barriers and time constraint.

The education professionals such as school principals and teachers need continuing education for their professional advancement but are embroiled with incessant work. To address this dilemma, the SEAMEO-INNOTECH offers short courses to school heads, potential school heads or teachers of the Department of Education through a non-traditional or flexible course delivery mode. The ICeXCELS (Instructional and Curricular Excellence in School Leadership and Management) is a course on instructional and curricular leadership designed specifically for Southeast Asian School Heads. Utilizing a

flexible delivery mode, the program uses self-instructional learning materials which incorporates adult learning principles. Particularly, the course is delivered through print-based and CD-based or web-based learning modules. The use of self-instructional modules is complemented by a set of Required Readings and the use of online interactive tools such as chat and discussion forums through the INNOTECH Flexible Learning Management System (iFLEX).

In the context of the changing landscape of adult education due to advancement of technology, this paper documents the experiences of an e-learning community, that is, a class in DepEd ICeXCELS from the Bicol Region, the Philippines.

Theoretical Underpinnings of Distance Education
The theory of transactional distance, and theory on community of inquiry with the support of interpretive phenomenology provide the theoretical underpinnings for this study. The Theory of Transactional Distance by Moore (1993 as cited by Giossos & Koutsouba, 2008) provides the broad framework of the pedagogy of distance education. Moore distinguishes two primary concepts pertaining to distance learning: distance teaching and learner autonomy. He points out that in independent studies (a term used in those days to refer to distance learning programs) one observes a separation and a space between the teacher and the learner. He names this distance transactional distance. The term does not refer to the geographical distance between the teacher and the learner but to the development (or not) of a transaction, in other words, the development of a particular form of interaction between teacher and learner because of their geographical separation.

Moreover, Anderson et al. (2001) posited a theoretical model for blended learning called Community of Inquiry. The model has three components: cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence. Cognitive presence supports the development of critical thinking. Social presence is the surrounding community and the culture. With a social presence, students feel safe to share their ideas and be open to new thoughts. Students can easily share their disagreements and viewpoints without feeling anxious of being degraded. The teacher presence means that there is someone organizing, facilitating and instructing the learning. Diekelmann and colleagues (2001) provides an assumption for the use of narratives as a vehicle for revealing human meanings and concerns, moral issues, and practical knowledge in teaching-learning episodes.

Definition of Distance Education
Distance education is simply defined as an academic environment that separates the instructor and learner during the majority of an instructional process; uses educational media to unite teacher and learner, and carry course content; and facilitates two-way communication between instructors and learners. This definition allows a multitude of delivery media and methodologies, ranging from written correspondence and videoconferencing to virtual classrooms (Steiner, 1995 as cited by Grandzol, Eckerson and Grandzol, 2004).

Rossman (2001) cited Keegan (1986), and Moore and Kearsley (1996) to present a comprehensive definition of distance education. "Distance education is characterized by a quasi-permanent separation of teacher and learner throughout the learning process, is supported by an educational entity (which may be public or private), uses technical media to carry the course content, provides two-way communication, and a quasi-permanent absence of a learning group" (Keegan, 1986 as cited by Rossman, 2001). Moore and

Kearsley (1996) define distance education as planned learning that normally occurs in a different place from teaching and as a result requires special techniques of course design, special instructional techniques, special methods of communication by electronic and other technology, as well as special organizational and administrative arrangements. According to Yoakam (n.d.), distance learning uses communications technologies to harness the vast array of resources available and stimulate the development of lifelong learning skills. Distance learning applications should begin with a clear understanding of the learner, as well as the educational needs and objectives of the organization. A comprehensive distance learning solution will often be a combination of technology options, creating a set of learning tools that meet the needs of both the instructor and the learner.

Based on the definitions cited, distance education offers an alternative mode of delivery which does not require face-to-face interactions. Therefore, both the teacher and the learners' schedule difference, family responsibilities, professional commitments are given due considerations, making the delivery flexible and adaptable to the preoccupations of the learners.

Distance Education and Andragogy
It has been widely recognized that distance education is an apt mode for the delivery of continuing education. Such a flexible learning mode will make continuing education accessible to more professionals over a wider geographical scope. Rossman (2001) presents andragogy as a framework for discussing distance education programs designed for the adult learner. Andragogically compatible processes, such as the "general-to-specific" approach (for developing learning contracts and individualizing course projects) and the "group charter" concept (for learner participation in asynchronous discussion forums), are strategies on how andragogy and distance education work together. Considering the use of strategies appropriate for adult learning, distance education will adequately allow for self-directed learning, critical reflection, experiential learning, and learning to learn (Brookfield, 1995). As Burge (1988 as cited by Rossman, 2001) argued, andragogy provides a context for developing distance education programs. It also provides a framework to build a climate conducive to adult learning and a process for more active involvement of the adult learner in the distance learning process.

Learning Outcomes in Online Learning
Prior studies show that online learning results to learning outcomes comparable to, if not better than face-to-face interaction. Carey (2002), for instance, found out online students are gaining knowledge comparable to the face-to-face students and that the online students are as satisfied on most dimensions as the face-to-face students. Additionally, Grandzol, Eckerson and Grandzol (2004) cited in their literature review that online and traditional methods are equally effective in an undergraduate management science course (Dellana, Collins, and West, 2000), and in a graduate level accounting course (Gagne and Shepherd, 2001); that online students scored significantly better than traditional students on exams in a social statistics course, Schutte (1998), or that traditional students performed significantly better on exams than online students in a microeconomics course (Brown and Liedholm, 2002). Focusing on the effectiveness of learning in asynchronous learning networks, Swan (2004) presented three types of interaction that affect on-line learning: interaction with peers, interaction with content, and interaction with instructors.

Teachers' Experiences on Distance Education

Distance education has led to **transformation of teacher's experiences as facilitators of learning**. As teachers navigate the demands in distance teaching, new pedagogies are created. The ways in which the familiar landmarks of teaching were challenged and in which their thinking of what constitutes schooling, learning, and teaching were recast and transformed (Diekelmann, et al (2001). In addition, Mosebach and Newmark (2003) found out that faculty members believe their Distance Learning (DL) courses are equally rigorous in terms of quantity and complexity of material, and acknowledge that their opinion towards DL changed after actually teaching a DL course.

Among the factors that contribute to successful online education include collaboration and regular communication, and rigorous training of faculty as online teachers while institutional and personal factors are among the stimulators of teachers involved in distance education. Nevin, et al (2000) argued that the key characteristics that made team teaching on the Internet a successful experience include sharing a common syllabus with which we were very familiar, capitalizing on each other's unique areas of expertise by referring to each other and our students, and communicating often which provided encouragement and support for each one to go beyond their current comfort levels. Trippe (2003) concludes that rigorous training of faculty by an online educational organization is an important element in student satisfaction and in the success of the distance learning program. Armstrong (2002) found out that faculty members are stimulated by both institutional and personal influences to initiate a learning project, and those who continue to teach at a distance and switch to a different mode of instructional technology appear to use multiple learning methods as they continue to learn when multiple local resources are readily available.

2. Objectives

This paper generally aims to identify and describe the experiences, problems, and insights of the online learners of the SEAMEO-INNOTECH Department of Education (DepEd) ICeXCELS online class. Specifically, it focuses on the following research objectives:

1. Describe the experiences of the DepEd principals as ICeXCELS online learners
   1.1. Determine the extent of participation in the synchronous and asynchronous

discussion

   1.2. Determine the kind of interaction of the online learners
   1.3. Describe and analyze the posts in the Chat Sessions (synchronous discussion)

and MyForum (asynchronous discussion)

   1.4. Describe the experiences along the following areas: Content of the course,

Mode of delivery, Interaction with co-learners, Interaction with online tutors, and Assessment Modalities;

2. Determine the problems encountered and their way of coping with these problems in

terms of ICT related problems, Work/DepEd policy related problems, and Course related problems;

3. Identify insights gained from the ICeXCELS experience in these areas: philosophy

and practices as school heads, plans for the school, and plans for one's continuing education; and

4. Propose solutions to the problems encountered.

3. Materials and Methods

Descriptive method of research using both qualitative and quantitative approaches was used to identify and describe the experiences, problems, and insights of the principals as online learners of the SEAMEO-INNOTECH DepEd IcEXCELS class. The analysis of the posts, submissions and reflection papers, the responses during the *revalida (face-to-face panel interview of the online learners at the end of the course)* and interview were qualitatively analyzed. The archived posts were also be analyzed to quantify the extent of participation as well as the type of interaction during the synchronous and asynchronous discussions.

Data sources were the Reflection Papers or narratives submitted by the online learners, the posts or printout of the archived Chat Sessions (Synchronous Discussion), the results of the interview during the *revalida*, and non-structured interviews, virtual group discussion (special chat session), and interview with the learners. Qualitative analysis was done by collating data from the reflection papers, responses to the interview, and responses during the chat sessions. Phenomena on the DepEd ICeXCELSwere not be reduced to simply differences or similarities but, rather, were explicated as the shared experiences of both the online tutor and learners, and themes were identified. Quantitative analysis was done through frequency count, ranking, percentage and mean of posts and online interactions.

4. Results and Discussion

The experiences of the DepEd principals as ICeXCELS online learners included the following : (1) the extent of participation in the synchronous; (2) the kind of interaction of the online learners; (3) the extent of participation in the asynchronous discussion; (4) the kind of posts in the Chat Sessions (synchronous discussion) and MyForum (asynchronous discussion); and the experiences along the following areas: content of the course, mode of delivery, interaction with co-learners, interaction with online tutors, preparatory activities/concerns, assessment modalities, and culminating activities.

Participation in the Synchronous and Asynchronous Discussion

Among the 15 online learners, seven were noted to be active in the synchronous discussion consisting of one learner with full extent of participation and six online learners with high extent of participation. These online learners were noted be young school heads with high level of computer literacy. Based on the interviews, all of them have their own laptops or computer units at home. The three online learners had moderate extent of participation. These online learners also encountered technical problems as well as difficulty in encoding their responses or comments. It was noted in the transcript, for instance, they would log in and out of the chatroom during the three-hour session. This can be explained by the poor internet connection. To address this concern, they actually either went to the Division Office or internet shop where the interconnectivity was strong.

Four online learners had least extent of participation. Although these learners were given beep by the online tutor, they still had the difficulty posting their comments and replies in the chatroom. All of them admitted that they had minimum computer literacy. In fact, two of them admitted their insufficient computer literacy that they had tutorial about the use of computer and about the use of internet after the orientation training. Indeed, as admitted they were slow in encoding their responses and comments. Only one learner was noted to have no participation at all. This school head is assigned in an island school, and could only go to the mainland during weekends. Since the class is scheduled on Tuesday at 2:00 to 5:00 pm, this online learner could not really join the synchronous discussion. Although she tried using a broadband, she explained that the signal was so weak and intermittent that it was practically impossible for her to be connected, and to log in the chatroom.

Table 1: Extent of Participation in the Synchronous Discussions

Learner	Total Posts	Ave Posts/Session	Extent of Participation
1	86	14	moderate extent
2	237	40	full extent
3	58	10	least extent
4	127	21	high extent
5	123	21	high extent
6	105	18	moderate extent
7	133	22	high extent
8	161	27	high extent
9	0	0	no participation
10	55	9	least extent
11	91	15	moderate extent
12	159	27	high extent
13	59	10	least extent
14	137	23	high extent
15	36	6	least extent

Kinds of Interactions in the Synchronous Discussion

The seven types of interactions were: teacher discussing-student commenting, teacher asking-students answering, students discussing-teacher commenting, student asking-teacher answering, student discussing-students commenting, students asking - students answering, and students answering - teacher feedbacking.

Among the seven types of interactions, teacher asking-students answering, student discussing-students commenting, teacher discussing-student commenting had the top three frequencies. Expectedly, these three were the most recurring type of interactions because conventionally, the teacher asked the questions and the learners answered the question, or the teacher discussed and the students gave comments. Interestingly noted however, is the active exchange of ideas between and among students since student discussing-students commenting was ranked second among the seven types of interactions.

The four other types of interactions which had low frequencies likewise support the conventional type of discussion wherein the protocol requires the online tutor to facilitate the discussion. As the facilitator of learning with all first-timers in online

learning, it was expected that learner-initiated interaction would be lesser compared to tutor initiated type of interactions.

Table 2: Frequency of the Types of Interactions per Chat Session

Type of Interaction	Chat Sessions							
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**Total**	**%**
teacher discussing-student commenting	65	58	98	3	14	95	333	22.33
teacher asking-students answering	102	73	141	50	5	191	562	37.69
students discussing-teacher commenting	6	26	24	0	5	7	68	4.56
student asking-teacher answering	2	1	11	4	1	8	27	1.81
student discussing-students commenting	53	111	146	0	6	108	424	28.44
students asking - students answering	13	1	21	13	1	0	49	3.29
students answering - teacher feedbacking	13	1	4	1	0	9	28	1.88
Total	**254**	**271**	**445**	**71**	**32**	**418**	**1491**	**100.00**

Kinds of Posts in the Synchronous Discussion

The course covered four synchronous sessions or chat sessions. However, the actual delivery of the courses included six chat sessions. Chat 3 and 4 were in Lesson 3 while Chat 5 was cut short by power interruption; therefore, there was a need for Chat 6 to cover Lesson 4. The total frequencies of interactions for Chat 1 and 2 could be explained by the technical problems which caused the logging in and out of many online learners, thereby reducing the time for their interaction. The level of connectivity was a factor for the frequency of interaction. For instance, Chat 3 and 4 had 445 and 418 interactions, respectively. This means that the connection of the online learners and online tutor was strong. Chat 1 and 2 had lesser interactions because of weak interconnectivity and power interruption.

The kind of posts considered were questions, answers, explanations, comments, announcements, feedback and self-corrections. Greetings were tallied but were excluded in the discussion. For the online tutor, the most recurring posts were questions, explanations and comments. This is expected since the online tutor is the facilitator of the online discussions. For the online learners, the most recurring posts were answers, explanations and comments. The answers and explanations were posted in response to the online tutor's questions while the comments were given both to the co-learners and to the online tutor. All these three kinds of posts were both solicited and unsolicited.

The overall picture reveals the most recurring posts in the chat sessions as answers, explanations and comments. This can be explained by the big number of online learners compared to one online tutor with a ratio of 14:1. Moreover, this can be a gauge for stating that all the online learners are hands-on in the work as school head, therefore they are able to share their ideas through their answers, explanations and comments. It is

interesting to note that the online learners also commented to their co-learners which shows their collegiality.

Table 3: Kinds of Posts in the Synchronous Discussions

Kinds of Posts	Tutor	%	Learners	%	Total	%
Questions	100	27.10	47	3.10	147	7.80
Answers	41	11.11	750	49.50	791	41.99
Explanations	78	21.14	251	16.57	329	17.46
Comments	65	17.62	249	16.44	314	16.67
Announcements	44	11.92	27	1.78	71	3.77
Feedback	39	10.57	70	4.62	109	5.79
Self-corrections	2	0.54	52	7.99	54	6.53
Total	369	100.00	1446	100.00	1815	100.00

Shown in Box 1 is a segment of the synchronous discussion on 21st century instructional leader. In this segment, the posts of the learners dealt on involving different stakeholders, and what needs to be done to become a 21st century instructional leader. Among the cited means to attain such were continuing education and being a good example as stated by the tutor, and self-learning, dedication and optimism as mentioned by the learners.

This exchange of thoughts ensued after the discussion of the characteristics of a leader and the functions of a school head. Specifically, the learners admitted that being a school head is a demanding work because of expectations from various stakeholders, too much paper works, absence of staff at the principal's office and time constraints. Consequently, most if not all of the learners admitted that they were either unable or rarely unable to perform their instructional functions such as class observations and conducting post conference after the observations. With this as the context of the discussion, it can be deduced that the learners are honest in expressing their observations and experiences even if these may show unfavorable realities about the public school system. The academic discourse therefore provides them a venue for the honest intellectual sharing which can be considered beneficial to them as school heads and as instructional leaders. Their acknowledgement of their deficiency as instructional leaders can serve as a starting point for reflection, which eventually may lead to improved performance as instructional leaders. Similarly, it can be stated that their participation in the discussion may serve as eye opener that their functions as instructional leaders are equally important as their functions as school administrators. In brief, the discussion served both as an academic discourse as well as a springboard for reflection. Moreover, it is evident in the sample segment of the synchronous discussion that although the online discussion went on smoothly, interruptions were noted. These include leaving the chatroom due to either power interruption or weak internet connection, or both.

Box 1: Sample Synchronous Discussion for Lesson 1

	14:24 Tutor: Now, my dear school heads, with all these descriptions and explanations for such descriptions
	14:24: Learner has just entered this chat
	14:24 Learner: as a school leader you must involve your stakeholders whatever activity in the school

	14:24 Learner: brown out here
	14:24 Tutor: do you think you can be considered as a 21st century instructional leader?
	14:24 Learner: If everyone is given a chance to achieve something, he/she will be motivated to achieve more.
	14:24 Tutor: Yes Mam, working in an organization with a heart and ear, will greatly help in achieving the vision, mission of the organization
	14:24: Learner has left this chat
	14:24 Learner: its balck out in MORMS right now
	14:25: Learner has left this chat
	14:25 Learner: mam gem pls instruct your ict teacher to use the generator pls
	14:25 Learner: mam we are experiencing power interruption
	14:25 Learner: Yes, we should always involve the different stakeholders for the the reason that educating the children is a shared responsibility, it's everyone concern.
	14:25 Rebecca Rosario: I am sure that there will be constraints and interruptions in terms of the technology, but we do hope to manage. Right, everyone.
	14:26 Learner: ok mam
	14:26 Learner: partly yes but i'm sure after this course, it's a 100% 21st century instructional leader
	14:26 Learner: yes Mam Becky
	14:26 Learner: ok mam.
	14:26 Learner: I agree, it takes a whole village to raise a child, it is a shared responsibility.
	14:26 Learner: In order to gain the full support of every stakeholder, we must celebrate success through words of appreciation and give due recognition to thier valuable contributions.
	14:26 Learner: That is good Sir Edwin, you are optimistic.
	14:26 Learner: yes as school leader we should do our part
	14:27 Learner: thanks a lot Ma'am
	14:27 Learner: It isw very important for a leader to give first hand information re school policies, programs and other concern affecting the school specially the issue on school performance
	14:27 Tutor: To be a 21st century instructional leader cannot happen overnight, though.
	14:27 Learner: Yes mam. even in managing the school, it is not only the school head who must do it.it is also a shared responsibility of all the stakeholders.
	14:27 Learner: yes mam thats right

	14:27 Learner: It really takes time..
	14:27 Tutor: But this course, and other forms of continuing education will help.
	14:28 Learner: yes as yu said it takes a whole village to raise a child
	14:28 Tutor: So, let me see if you studied your lesson.
	14:28 Learner: this is one way of upgrading our comptencies as school head
	14:28 Learner: its very hard to become a school leader if you do not know how to mange.
	14:28 Learner: Yes mam it needs ample time for transformation
	14:28 Learnerr: Becoming a great leader needs lot of self-learning,.dedication....
	14:28 Learner: Yes, there are challenges along the way. But if we are optimistic, we can surely achieve our aim of being a 21st century instructional leader.
	14:29 Tutor: To be a good leader, instructional or otherwise, you must first be a good example.

Extent of Learners' Participation in the Asynchronous Discussion

Results in Table 4 reveal that of the 15 learners, nine were found to have least participation or 1-2 replies per topic. Four learners have moderate participation or 3-4 replies per topic, one learner with high participation and one learner with no participation. Most of the learners have least participation though their replies were noted to be lengthy replies to the original post or question of the tutor. Moreover, this can be explained by less interaction of the learners with one another since the most recurring discussion interaction was between the tutor and the learner. Although most have least participation, it was salient that almost all had participation. The varying extents of participation may be explained by the extent of work or assignments of the learners, and the internet connection available to them.

It was also noted that the time of posting of replies varies with replies posted before, during and after office hours. In particular there were posts done early in the morning, morning or afternoon during office hours, afternoon after office hours, early or late evening, and almost midnight. This was possible because of the accessibility of the discussion platform though the internet thus making the asynchronous discussion learner friendly in terms of time on task or schedule of engagement. As shown by the samples of asynchronous transcripts, the initial replies or comments of the learners are lengthy and exhaustive explanations which include cited works. The succeeding posts were noted as brief comments either to the online tutor's comment or co-learner comments or replies. The lengthy comments were formal while the short replies showed informal and conversation tone.

Table 4: Extent of Learners' Participation in the Asynchronous Discussion

Learner	1	2	3	4	Total Posts	Ave Posts/ Topic	Extent of Participation
1	1	1	1	2	5	1.25	Least Participation
2	4	2	6	7	19	4.75	Moderate Participation
3	1	1	1	2	5	1.25	Least Participation
4	3	1	2	1	7	1.75	Least Participation
5	1	2	2	1	6	1.5	Least Participation
6	7	5	2	4	18	4.5	Moderate Participation
7	2	2	1	2	7	1.75	Least Participation
8	4	2	3	4	13	3.25	Moderate Participation
9	0	0	0	0	0	0	No Participation
10	0	0	1	1	2	0.5	Least Participation
11	1	2	1	1	5	1.25	Least Participation
12	5	2	6	3	16	4	Moderate Participation
13	1	2	1	1	5	1.25	Least Participation
14	2	1	12	12	27	6.75	High Participation
15	0	0	2	0	2	0.5	Least Participation
Total	32	23	41	41	137		

Problems Encountered by the Online Learners and Their Coping Mechanisms

The online learners encountered varied problems categorized as follows: ICT related problems, work-related problems and course-related problems.

In terms of ICT related problems, both facilities and computer skills of the learners were covered. The problems along ICT facilities included absence or weak internet connection in the school, unavailability of laptop or computer in the school, power interruption, and absence of signal in the island or remote school. All these problems on facilities can be explained by the overall lack of ICT facilities in public schools due to scarce resources. Budgetary constraints usually hinder a public school to procure state-of-the-art ICT facilities. The problem on power interruption in the area which is indeed recurring, was beyond the control of the learners. So is the problem on the absence of signal in the island or remote school. In order to cope with these problems, the learners either went to the internet cafe or bought broadband to have access to internet so they could participate in both the synchronous and asynchronous discussions.

As for the ICT skills of the learners, a few problems were also noted. Most of the learners admitted that they were hesitant to participate in the online learning due their limited ICT skills such as encoding, web search or having no experience in online class. These problems were addressed by having personal tutorial sessions with family, relatives

or internet cafe staff. Some of the learners narrated that they had practice sessions in encoding or using of the computer. The coping mechanisms of the learners provided them with the opportunity to acquire or enhance their ICT skills in the context of their work.

In dealing with the work-related problems, the learners reported the following: overlapping of DepEd activities and online course schedule, some learners were absent during the synchronous discussions because of other assignments or tasks, and delayed release of memorandum to the concerned online learners hence they were late in attending the training prior to the start of the online classes. The concerned learners coped with these work-related problems by attending to both the online class and the assignment or task given. This then resulted to minimal participation in the synchronous discussion. The minimal participation in the chat sessions however was complemented by more postings in the asynchronous discussion in the MyForum. The time constraint of the school heads due to hectic schedule can be considered as the root cause of the noted work-related problems. This can be avoided if the school heads enrolled as online learners will be given release time at least on the schedule of the synchronous discussion which is equivalent to three hours per week. This simple means can ensure the maximum participation of the learners in the synchronous discussions. The asynchronous discussions may involve the learners at their own convenient time at any given place where interconnectivity is available.

Lastly, in terms of course-related problems, the learners admitted scarce knowledge on curricular and instructional leadership. For instance, most of the learners claimed that they had inadequate background knowledge on curriculum development or enrichment curriculum while some claimed that they have never been involved in the development of curriculum or of enrichment curriculum. Other noted problems were delayed submission of the requirements or incomplete submissions. These can be explained by the time constraints that confronted the learners due to hectic schedule and absence of release time during their engagement in the online classes. To cope with these problems, the learners who were immediately given feedback by the learners online, communicated with the tutor to seek advice, suggestions or to ask questions. Given the opportunity to revise, the learners who received suggestions to revise or enrich submissions or outputs, resubmitted and re-uploaded their submissions. Other learners claimed that they reread the different lessons in the modules or searched the web for further readings in order to improve their submissions.

Insights Gained by Online Learners of DepEd ICeXCELS

The online learners gained insights useful to the performance of their duties as school heads. Specifically, the learners gained insights which can be useful in enhancing their philosophy and practices as school heads. The discussions on school heads as CEO, instructional leadership, enrichment curriculum, Basic Education Sector Reform Agenda (BESRA), emotional intelligence, transformational leadership among others led to insights which they can apply in their respective work stations. Similarly, the topics covered by the online course served as eye-opener to school heads in terms of managing and leading the school. The requirements of the course such as the conduct of meeting, action plans and sample enrichment curriculum were challenging but served as a precursor for involving the colleagues or teachers, thereby making the learners realize deeply the significance of each member of the school system, thus affirming the discussion on collegiality or shared leadership.

All the learners admitted that despite their hesitation to participation in the online class at the start, they have come to realize that e-learning or distance education or online

learning is an effective means of gaining professional development. The learners claimed that they did not simply see but rather experience the advantage of using technology as a tool to increase access to continuing education undertakings. Lastly, the learners realized that they also need exposure to academic personalities who are not from their own organization to allow them to have different perspectives.

Below are some of the comments and narrations of the learners which support the insightful experience they had with the online course.

"This course helped me a lot in practicing my strong drive for responsibility and task completion and even developed my leadership style to be more of an initiator that would help me [gauges] my strengths and weakness and limitations in empowering teachers and pupils towards achieving our school's educational goals."

"Principals are one of those professionals who are endowed with multiple responsibilities. Thus, the following were the realizations: 1)Instructional and curriculum leadership must be given more emphasis; 2)Teachers must be directly involved in crafting the curriculum since they are directly involved in the teaching-learning process; thus, principals must establish good rapport to them; and 3) Parents and other internal and external stakeholders must be considered as partners of the school development."

"I will never forget the insights I gained on the beauty of shared leadership which our tutor strongly emphasized through the postings on the forum. Co-ownership develops a sense of responsibility that in whatever direction the school is heading, we are all responsible to it."

"Another significant and very relevant topic is about emotional intelligence. I remember, we had a very nice sharing on this particular issue during our online chat. We exchanged different views on who will be a better administrator, the one with higher EQ or the one with higher IQ. Brilliant ideas were posted but one realization I discovered was that a principal with high EQ is able to Appreciate, Understand, Respond, and Adapt to the challenges that beset him/her. Moreover, a principal with high EQ sees challenging situations as opportunities not as hindrances."

"The best thing that came into my mind, through experiences during the chat sessions was the importance of Technology Leadership in Education. Information Communication Technology (ICT) is very important in the delivery of communications and basic skills required to access global competitiveness for all, this making me realize that I need to have a Computer Laboratory in my school to make ICT integration accessible to all pupils and teachers. I also dream of having computer literacy program and maximize the use of computer technology in the core subjects"

Table 5: Insights Gained by Online Learners of DepEd ICeXCELS

Areas in the ICeXCELS Experience	Insights Gained by the Online Learners
Philosophy and Practices as school heads	▪ As first-time online learners, the ICeXCELS is highly relevant to their current work. ▪ The specific topics served as an eye opener that as school heads, they still have much to learn about managing schools, making action plans, preparing, implementing and evaluating enrichment curriculum, EFA, and being instructional leaders. ▪ The requirements are challenging yet highly relevant to their work; required them to involve their colleagues.
Plans for the school	▪ Topics included in the course can be shared with teachers (such as transformational leadership, roles of school heads, instructional leadership, enrichment curriculum, emotional quotient and additional topics like shared leadership, collegiality). ▪ What is learned from this course may be replicated by the school heads. ▪ Realized the importance of Information Communication Technology (ICT), and the need to have a Computer Laboratory in the school.
Plans for one's continuing education	▪ Distance education or online learning is an effective means of gaining professional development. ▪ Further reading, surfing the internet and learning more about using the computer are necessary tools for school heads. ▪ DepEd school heads need exposure to a resource person (online tutor) who is not from DepEd.

Proposed Solutions to Problems Encountered

The actual experiences explicated by the learners along the various aspects of online learning together with the identified problems as well as coping mechanisms and insights gained, serve as basis for proposing practical solutions to minimize the occurrence of the same problems in the implementation of the course to future batches, or of similar e-learning courses in the university.

The problems on the lack of ICT facilities can be addressed through the provision of ICT facilities. In case budgetary constraints exist, the school may involve different stakeholders to seek assistance from non-government agencies and philanthropic individuals, or conduct fund raising activities involving various stakeholders to source out ICT facilities. In terms of lack of ICT skills, this can be addressed through school-based intensive training for the teachers in partnership with other institutions such as State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) which are mandated to have extension service to the community.

In terms of the work-related problems, it is highly suggested that the online learners who are scholars of the government should be given adequate release time during the duration of the online course. The release time at least during the scheduled synchronous discussions or chat sessions will allow the learners to participate actively in the discussions. Preferably, the school heads who are enrolled in the online course should be exempted from additional routine or non-routine assignments at least during the scheduled synchronous discussions.

As for the course related problems such as lack of background knowledge on certain courses or inaccurate or incomplete submissions, the learners are encouraged to coordinate with their tutor. The tutor can be reached through the virtual system, emails or mobile phone. The tutor was trained to assist the learners especially along the content of the course.

On the whole, these proposed solutions may be considered by a university that is planning to institutionalize its distance education. In this way, the occurrence of similar problems can be avoided, thus ensuring the clients of the distance education or e-learning to be satisfied and to attain maximum benefits from the online program.

Overall, the principals who are all first-time online learners, described their experience with ICeXCELS as intimidating at first but learner-friendly, enjoyable, rewarding, highly relevant, useful, and even life-changing. Table 6 shows the commonalities of the experiences of the online learners. In terms of the content of the course, the learners claimed that they experienced informative, relevant and useful information, ideas, insights and perspectives. In terms of the modality of learning, the learners claimed that they experienced new and user-friendly modality of learning which is suitable to them who always have hectic schedules, and which involved technical challenges. In terms of interaction with co-learners, their experiences can be described as productive, pleasant and reciprocally beneficial interaction with co-learners. In terms of interaction with the tutor, their experiences can be wholly described as a productive, dynamic scholarly experience with the tutor. Finally, in terms of the assessment modality or tools, they had practice-based assessment experiences which generated self-reflection.

Table 6: Common Themes in the Experiences of the Online Learners

Aspects of the Experiences of the Online Learners	Commonalities in the Experiences	Common Themes in the Experiences
Content of the Course	▪ Content provides discussion, information and insights necessary or important to the performance of functions, roles and responsibilities. ▪ Content is relevant and applicable to the work of school head and their learning needs as academic professionals. ▪ Content included useful information on instructional leadership and curriculum enrichment and implementation. ▪ Content is simple, clear and comprehensive.	Informative, relevant and useful content
Modality of Learning	▪ The modality of learning is new. ▪ The online learners encountered technical challenges ▪ The modality of learning is user-friendly. ▪ The modality of learning is suitable for school heads. ▪ Technical support is available.	New, user-friendly and suitable modality of learning involving technical challenges
Interaction with Co-Learners	▪ The learners gained useful insights from co-learners. ▪ The learners enjoyed exchanging ideas and learning with co-learners. ▪ The learners strengthened their appreciation of	Productive, pleasant and reciprocally beneficial interaction with co-

	their co-learners' ideas, comments and insights.	learners
Interaction with the Tutor	▪ Interaction with the tutor is a scholarly experience. ▪ Interaction with the tutor motivated to accomplish the activities. ▪ The learners gained useful ideas and insights and practical opinions in their interaction with the tutor. ▪ Interaction with the tutor including feedbacks and follow-up questions is challenging and inspiring.	Productive, dynamic scholarly experience with the tutor
Assessment Modalities/Tools	▪ Assignments allowed learners to collaborate with teachers in their respective schools. ▪ Pre-test and posttest allowed learners to see their improvement by themselves. ▪ Assignments allowed learners to share their learnings with colleagues or teachers. ▪ Final interview or *revalida* is challenging.	Assessment modalities/ tools is practice-based and allowed for self-reflection

Considering theory of transactional distance, the experiences of the online learners can be explained by its two primary concepts: distance teaching and learner autonomy (Moore, 1996). The distance between the learners and the tutor, and among the learners does not only mean separation in terms of space, rather it refers to a transactional distance, a form of interaction between the tutor and the learners, and among the learners which was made possible by synchronous and asynchronous discussions. Autonomy is affirmed by the experiences of the school heads as online learners. Their experiences reveal their independence as adult learners who were capable of finding and using resources and performing required activities included in the self-instructional modules. Both the design of the materials and the ease of accessing the portal together with the adequate groundings as school heads have contributed to the learner's autonomy.

In addition, in view of the theoretical model for blended learning called Community of Inquiry, the online learning class can be viewed as a community of inquiry composed of three components: cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence (Anderson et al, 2001). The questions and issues raised by the tutor during the synchronous discussions provided impetus for analysis and critical thinking, thereby affirming cognitive presence. In terms of social presence, the online learners shared their ideas and practices openly without fear of prejudice during the chat sessions and even the asynchronous discussions. Likewise, they manifested a sense of openness to the topics and issues presented by the tutor such as shared leadership, enrichment curriculum, emotional intelligence, among others. The teacher presence was evident since there was an online tutor who facilitated the synchronous and asynchronous discussions, and provided cues and reminders to the learners.

5. Conclusion

Distance education is an alternative mode for continuing education among working professionals who may be hindered by geographical barriers and time constraint. In this study focusing on an e-learning community, the distance education of the principals prove to be a reflective and gainful continuing education experience despite challenges and constraints. Particularly, they considered their experiences as online learners as informative, relevant, insightful and fruitful scholarly engagement with the co-learners and tutor using a novel modality of learning. Though faced with ICT-related

problems which affect their performance and reveals the problem regarding computerization of public schools, and work-related problems and course related problems, the principals had coping mechanisms are helpful during and even after the duration of the online course.

The insights generally gained by the principals relate to their philosophy and practice as school heads, plan for their schools, and plan for their continuing education undertakings. These insights are applicable to their current work as school heads, and enhance their positive attitude toward their work and toward the teachers as their colleagues or partners in leadership. Though limited to one e-class, the study reveals useful insights on how the university will address the challenges in the delivery of distance education, and how it will improve its current system of distance education. As with many prior studies on distance education, the current findings add up to the literature which will help educators better understand and appreciate distance education.

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7. The authors
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