

E-learning here to stay as virus dramatically changes education landscape

Tuition

When tuition centres had to close during the circuit breaker, tutor Lim Wei Yi felt like he had changed jobs to become a TV host.

He had no choice then but to present his lessons on Zoom to his audience of students online.

Mr Lim, who co-founded the

Study Room tuition centre, had been making plans for at least a month in anticipation of school closures and stricter measures to curb the pandemic, but did not expect that teaching classes online could be so mentally and physically tiring.

“I would end my classes at 6.30pm, and by 7pm or 8pm, I would be knocked out,” said Mr Lim, who taught the same hours as before, starting as early as 9.30am on Saturdays.

“Parents sometimes ask, is there a price difference between physical classes and online classes? We don’t offer a lower price because actually, the online class is more tedious than the physical class, and it doesn’t mean that we give less attention to the students.”

Despite the challenges, Mr Lim retained the online classes as part of hybrid lessons, even when the centre was allowed to reopen in phase two. Students now take turns to attend classes in person or

dial in from home over Zoom.

This mirrors how e-learning in schools will soon be a regular feature for students here.

By next year, blended learning – a mix of face-to-face teaching and home-based learning (HBL) – will be the reality for Singapore students at all levels, who will have at least two HBL days a month even after Covid-19 subsides.

Mr Justin Leow, tutor and head of centre and teaching excellence at The Learning Lab, said one ad-

vantage of online lessons is the flexibility they offer.

Students can save on travelling time and log in to Zoom from school or from home, he said, allowing them to “squeeze more into the day and get more things done”.

“The challenge, of course, is that they’re all doing this in a synchronous fashion. The teacher is in class, not only facing the students physically, but also facing students learning from home,” he said.

“They have to manage three

kinds of inputs at the same time: students raising their hands in the classroom, students at home trying to ask questions through audio, and students who are more shy typing their questions into the chat.”

Mr Lim said another advantage of online classes is being able to mute rowdy students and prevent them from distracting their peers.

While in-person teaching is still his preference, he said that holding classes online also gave him the idea of inviting special guests

to speak to his students over Zoom.

Last June, his class was able to hear from Mr Rahul Dubey, an American who opened his doors to 80 protesters and sheltered them from the police during the Black Lives Matter protests in Washington, DC. This would not have been possible in person.

Mr Lim said: “Just like working from home, I think online classes are here to stay, and if I were to get rid of them, I would be behind the curve.”

Mr Leow said he expects schools, universities and enrichment centres to be ready to switch to “pandemic mode” periodically

from now on.

Professor Bernard Tan, senior vice-provost of undergraduate education at the National University of Singapore (NUS), agreed, noting that Covid-19 has dramatically changed the education landscape.

“We expect online and technology-enhanced learning to continue to play a central role after the pandemic,” he said.

At universities around the world, e-learning has become a necessity to allow students to continue their education amid strict border controls and lockdowns.

During the semester that ran from January to May last year, NUS moved 3,600 modules online, and

teaching staff had to adopt alternative assessment modes, such as online exams and take-home assignments, Prof Tan said.

Associate Professor Erle Lim, NUS vice-provost of teaching innovation and quality, said the pandemic has accelerated digitalisation efforts at the university.

Even when in-person lessons could resume, it was important to continue having hybrid learning to accommodate students who were still overseas, on stay-home notice or on medical leave, he said.

“By making these changes, we hope that NUS can become more nimble and resilient.”

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