



Replicating learnings

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For some Australia Awards scholars who left the Philippines to study abroad, there is no guarantee that the position they left in their organizations will still be there after their scholarships. Fortunately for me, I was assigned in a position that was intended for me when I get back.

Previously, I was involved with an eLearning project of our university through the Mindanao eLearning Space (MiSpace) consortium, which was a sub-component of the Basic Assistance for Mindanao (BEAM) project. The plan was for me to take up my Master in eLearning at the

University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) so I could help improve our eLearning unit and support the delivery of programs of MiSpace and the BEAM project.

I stayed in UTS from January to December 2006 and appreciated how we were made to undergo an Introductory Academic Program (IAP) before classes officially started. It helped us a lot in transitioning to the Australian education system. I also got engaged with a group of international scholars, some sponsored by the Australian Government, where we provide support to our fellow international students from within our program.

Infusing technology

One particular area in eLearning that I focused on is the instructional systems. Since we already have an office for eLearning and I had the support of the university from the conceptualization of my Re-Entry Action Plan (REAP), I was able to immediately start implementing it upon my return.

However, I found out that developing eLearning systems has to be suitable to our local context including Information Technology (IT) infrastructure, training, and policies, among others. Because of these factors, I had to modify some of my plans along the way.

I kept thinking of my experiences in Australia and wanted to align them with the programs we intended to infuse in my university. Eventually, we were able to offer Master of Education in Instructional Leadership (MEIL), which included the technology-based component. Through it, distance education students were able to collaborate, interact, and learn outside a traditional classroom. My Australian training in the field of eLearning played a very important role in this.

The Australian government assisted us further by providing scholarship for local Department of Education (DepEd) teachers so they could attend our short-term training programs. The university recognized that it could use the modality and develop the learning packages without making them semestral; hence, the MEIL program.

The university also sent more scholars to pursue advanced education in Australia. Among them was my partner who focused on the management side of delivering a technology-based training program. He was in charge of managing the unit while I was assigned to handle the

technology components. Our targeted training and the balance of our roles in implementing our REAPs made us a stronger team, which eventually continued to develop systems for the university even beyond our REAPs.

We came up with 23 eLearning modules for various programs including educational leadership, agriculture, and management. During that time, part of our plan was to sustain the unit by accommodating other programs and courses with students who want to avail of instructional management systems that were already in place.

Modifying applications

There were a lot of learnings in Australia that we wanted to replicate here but it took time for our colleagues to slowly accept that the way we do things in the university, in terms of instruction and research, is already quite outdated. I believe that one of our significant contributions to the organization is the change of mindset and enculturation of people in our organization to accept systems and practices we introduced.

I am thankful for the constant collaboration and communication with other colleagues in the professional field of IT and eLearning and, of course, the Australian alumni networks built through PAHRODF. I was given a lot of other opportunities to grow through my involvement with several professional organizations and participation in conferences and other activities. Based on my experience, I learned that the Philippines is not behind in terms of what other educational institutions are doing with technology integration. It just so happens that we lack some of the needed infrastructure and technology especially in the remote areas that we serve.

I took a leave from the university again when the Australian government awarded me with another scholarship in January 2012. This time, I was accepted in the Doctor of Information Technology program of the University of New South Wales (UNSW). As of this writing, I am finalizing my thesis due for submission this May 2014. I am hoping to return to USEP after and continue what we have started.

While I was gone, I could say that USEP was able to sustain the programs we implemented. In short, from the MEIL program that we developed, the concept grew and evolved. Now, it's no

longer a special program but a regular program for the college. The university also accommodated other programs for students who are interested to take courses that are not under the MEIL. A similar program taking the same modality, the eMBA, was also implemented.

Benefiting from networking

It helped a lot that we had the support of the university management, colleagues, and our team in the eLearning unit. I am also thankful for the collaborators and subject matter experts whom we worked with to develop different eLearning modules.

Being able to network with other institutions gave birth to other projects, such as those we did for the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), and the Department of Agriculture (DA). I consider that one of the benchmarks of my REAP's success is the discovery of new ways to share learnings and build partnerships with other organizations.

The second phase of my scholarship is still aligned with the vision to improve USEP's educational system and be able to impart that throughout the region. My PhD is still part of the educational technology field and implementation is purely focused on expanding what we have already done. When I return to USEP this May 2015, we intend to implement different approaches including the enhancement of technology-based integration, and the improvement of the assessment and evaluation of the programs in the university. We also intend to roll out more instructional systems to other colleges in the university.

Together with my fellow Australia Awards scholars, we plan to synergize a plan of action that can possibly create a bigger impact in our organizations and the development of the region. We are likewise planning to introduce learnings from Australia that do not yet exist in the Philippine university culture. One of these is the three-minute thesis competition that could improve undergraduate and graduate students' research culture.

The competition will enable students to present their research to a non-technical but educated audience so they could market their ideas and not just leave them on a library shelf. I believe it

will not only benefit those in the IT field but also those from other departments such as language and education.

I have encouraged other friends to also apply for the Australia Awards Scholarships with the aim to find out how they can contribute to their local communities. As for fellow scholars who had difficulties implementing their REAPs due to lack of support from their organizations, we want to get them involved, too.

Ultimately, institutionalising one's REAP should not be enough because the Australian experience has taught us that we can do much more than that.

Val Quimno finished his Master in eLearning at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) in 2006. His REAP was all about developing eLearning systems for the university and its outreach programs. Currently, Val is pursuing his doctorate degree in Australia.