The digital reshaping of English instruction in a Philippine university during the time of pandemic

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Abstract

This paper examines the reshaping of the English curriculum in higher education in the Philippines during the COVID-19 pandemic. With lockdown protocols enforced in the capital region Metro Manila, formal education has shifted to digital format. In this study, we focus on the case of a top-ranked university in Manila, which has implemented a full-scale online conversion of course content and delivery beginning Academic Year 2020-2021. Focusing on the English language curriculum, we explore online teaching as a figured world, a realm that shapes and is shaped by discourses and artifacts co-constructed by characters in this new landscape. This qualitative study presents the thematic analysis of institutional documents produced by policy makers and teachers that set the parameters for the digitization of English language units. The findings have implications for expanding epistemologies on the pandemic-induced, digital reconfiguration of higher education in Global South settings.

Keywords: figured world, English language curriculum, online education, COVID-19 pandemic

1.   Introduction

It is nearly two years now since the global education system underwent an emergency shift from traditional face-to-face instruction to fully online education. The COVID-19 pandemic that triggered this massive digital migration in the academia continues to threaten the world, particularly developing countries like the Philippines where virus containment seems more challenging. This highly volatile situation keeps education policy makers on their toes as the global health condition continues to evolve.

Besides public health, another social domain that took a heavy blow from this persistent pandemic is education, particularly the private school sector. In the Philippines, the Department of Education, which oversees the curriculum from kinder to grade 12, reported

that a total of 865 private schools suspended operations in 2020 due to low enrollment. The steep drop in enrollment is claimed to be partly due to the inability of private schools to implement learning management systems to facilitate distance learning. The school closures affected 58,327 students and 4,488 teachers, who were mostly forced to move to public schools (ABS-CBN News, 2020). Similar enrollment trends have been noted in higher education (Magsambol, 2020). Top-ranking universities, however, have managed to roll out online learning systems that allow instruction to be delivered synchronously and asynchronously (Joaquin, Biana, & Dacela, 2020).

To target the twofold priority of managing public safety against the dreaded virus and supporting education activities, universities moved teachers and students from physical to virtual classrooms. Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, and other video conferencing applications, as well as devices that can support them, have become the new staple in schools. These virtual platforms provided continuity for instructional delivery but not without cost. For instance, 'Zoomed' classes are commonly criticized as lacking in human touch and interactional fluidity that is easily apparent in face-to-face meetings. Online interactions are prone to what Blum (2020) called "human-technology-semiotic mismatch" or the tendency for technology to significantly shape (or distort) online conversations, providing a digital excuse for misaligned eye contact and speech overlaps. Yet these interaction challenges in virtual classrooms form only the tip of the iceberg. An almost general overhauling of the entire higher education curriculum was undertaken. Course targets, instructional materials, pedagogical approaches, classroom activities, and assessment guidelines, were all modified to fit into the digital mold—a massive adjustment, to say the least.

Understanding this new, digital shape of higher education in the era of COVID-19 is the focus of this study. Specifically, we examine the digital reshaping of the English curriculum in a top-ranking university in Manila as a case study of the Philippine experience. In doing this, we first discuss research done on virtual learning in the pandemic context. This brief literature review situates the present investigation in the research gap. Then, we explain the figured worlds framework and how our use of this lens in the Philippine context is a novel contribution to scholarship in English language education. This is followed by a discussion of the data, analysis method, and findings that address the research question: What are the characteristics of the figured world of online English instruction in the Humanities and Social Sciences?

2.   Research on Online Learning in the COVID-19 Pandemic Era

Scholarship on pandemic-induced online education has mainly focused on the challenges and affordances of a fully digital curriculum. Largely perception based, these studies investigate the experiences of teachers and students (Fatima, 2021; Mukhter & Chowdhary, 2020; Srivastava, 2021). Student-focused research have reported on learners' views of synchronous online discussions (Rinesko & Muslim, 2020) and ways that virtual learning has contributed to a more enriched learning experience (Baggerman & James, 2021). More studies have

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examined the various ways that online instruction has impacted students' lives, including their learning motivation (Rahman, Uddin, & Dey, 2021), performance (Gopal, Singh, & Aggarwal, 2021), behavior, emotions (Maican & Cocoradă, 2021), and mental health (Labrague & Ballad, 2021). Meanwhile, literature on online teacher experience has examined implications of the abrupt and absolute digital migration in their identity formation (Kim & Asbury, 2020) and particular areas of difficulty (Hamad, Dafaallah, & Alhaj, 2021), such as the widening of the digital and linguistic divide (Parveen, 2020). Studies have also identified instructional strategies to help facilitate online teaching (Mahmood, 2021) and teachers' views on flexible learning (Tarrayo, Paz, & Gepila Jr, 2021).

Collectively, these studies offer a narrative-based understanding of 21st century education in its present form. Gathering evidence mostly through surveys and interviews, these reports emphasize the struggles and strategies of participants who are mostly new to a fully online curriculum. They help us understand how the practices and views of key social actors, who have been socialized in face-to-face modality, have been (re)shaped in the virtual context. Two things, however, seem to be ignored in this growing conversation. First, how have the social actors, in turn, (re)shaped the context, particularly the curriculum? The potential bidirectionality of change effect has so far been little explored. Secondly, what is the contribution of education policy makers in these circumstances? Academic administrators, as overseers and directors of academic programs and various institutional functions, have a significant role in (re)shaping the teaching and learning landscape. By accounting for these two underrepresented areas of online education today, our research proposes that virtual learning is more than the sum of teachers' and students' reported experiences.

3.   *Figured Worlds*: A Framework for Understanding the Online University Curriculum

To widen the discourse constructed around online education in the global pandemic context, this study adopts the figured worlds framework. Proponents Holland et al. (1998) define figured worlds as a realm that is a product of social and cultural construction:

> Figured worlds shape within and grant shape to the coproduction of activities, discourses, performances, and artifacts. A figured world is peopled by the figures, characters, and types who carry out its tasks and who also have styles of interacting within, distinguishable perspectives on, and orientations toward it. (p. 51)

A figured world is conceptualized as having four characteristics. First, it represents a historical, cultural phenomenon, something that exists in time and space to which participants are recruited or enter. Second, it is a site where a participant's position is consequential and gives meaning to actions and activities done in this setting. Third, in this socially organized and institutionally reproduced space, participants are assigned roles and relate to each other

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on the basis of these roles. Fourth and last, it is a site where identities are (re)constructed (Urrieta, 2007).

This theory has been widely used in identity studies situated in education contexts. In teacher education research, figured worlds have been applied to describe preservice teachers' experience of transitioning into a full-fledged teacher identity (Gelfuso & Dennis, 2017; Saunders & Ash, 2013; Varghese & Snyder, 2018). In literacy education studies, this lens has been used to view the literacy class as a site of tension between compliance with rigid institutionalized standards of literacy and teacher agency (Costley, 2014; Pennington, 2007). Similarly, the English language program for adult migrant learners (Chao & Kuntz, 2013), the science curriculum (Price & McNeill, 2013), and online math programs (Darragh & Franke, 2021) have been examined as figured worlds inhabited by characters—teachers and students—who have distinct ways of doing and being.

Interestingly, these studies are predominantly situated in Global North settings, or more developed economies, such as the USA, London, and New Zealand. To the best of our knowledge, no study has yet applied the figured worlds framework in Global South contexts, like the Philippine higher education system, and in a definitive time in modern world history as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. By exploring this novel research site and historical context through the figured worlds lens, our study potentially contributes new theoretical knowledge in global education in general and in English curriculum development in particular. Using this framework, we propose viewing the online teaching of English as a figured world that is mutually shaped by academic officials, teachers, and students. The roles and identities of these characters, in turn, are shaped by this virtual, academic figured world.

## 4.	Method

### 4.1	Research Site

Our research site is a top comprehensive university in Manila run by a Catholic religious order. We focused on this institution because of its reputation as a high-ranking university in the Philippines (uniRank, 2021) providing undergraduate credentials in English language studies, as well as a pioneer in e-learning adoption in the Philippines. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic set in, it already had in place Blackboard as its learning management system (LMS) which was then optionally used by teachers to supplement their classroom-based instructional methods. Since the early 2000s, the institution's education technology arm has trained more than 2,000 teachers. When the institution started implementing its educational services fully online via the Enhanced Virtual Mode (i.e., combining synchronous and asynchronous strategies and team-teaching approaches) in academic year 2020-2021 (Cayongcat & Magpali, 2020), it continued to use the Blackboard LMS, which features provision of course content to students in a specific location, communication and collaboration functions, attendance tracking, course availability status among others (Putka, 2020)

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In deciding to focus on Humanities and Social Sciences, we considered two things—first, the size of the English curriculum in these disciplines relative to other areas and, second, our positionality as researchers. In the chosen university, the Humanities and Social Sciences curricula have more English language units compared with other disciplines. In other words, the English curriculum is more salient in these program areas. Another important factor is the long-standing relationship of the authors with this institution. The second and third authors are academic officials and, as well as the first author, are English language teachers in these disciplines. In these roles, we have access to relevant data and have a professional interest in understanding this relatively new world of teaching that we have been forced to inhabit by global circumstances beyond human control. While insiders of the studied institution, we maintained impartiality in our analysis by disregarding names and titles of school officials and teachers identified in the examined data. At the same time, we acknowledge that as researchers, our positionality as teachers and administrators inevitably shapes our interpretation. Indeed, qualitative research, such as this, is "ideologically driven" and cannot be entirely "bias free" (Janesick, 2000, p. 385).

4.2   Data

The type of data used in this study is institutional documents. Unlike interviews and surveys which have been widely used in current literature, this textual data represents authentic evidence of ideologies that are not influenced by our research inquiry. The documents analyzed were created by institutional authors for ad hoc purposes, such as guidelines dissemination and/or monitoring, related to the online design and delivery of English units in the Humanities and Social Sciences. We included in our data collection and analysis, documents authored by academic officials and/or teachers between March 2020 and April 2021. This timeframe represents the transition period from fully face-to-face to fully online teaching of the English curriculum.

Table 1 summarizes the data set, which consists of six types of institutional documents.

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Table 1
Data set

Document type (Code)	Description	Author/s	Number of texts
Institutional memorandum (IM)	IM is a document released by the top management, usually by the Office of Academic Affairs, in coordination with the central offices concerned with upgrading the digital skills of the faculty to enable them to cope with the demands of the curriculum and sudden shift in the mode of delivery of instruction brought about by the pandemic. In general, these documents bring attention to the challenges experienced in the work environment by the different stakeholders, leading to the creation of new policies and/or retention of guidelines. These new policies and/or guidelines are decided upon by the heads of the academic units and approved before they are cascaded to the faculty for implementation through the monitoring of the departments.	Academic officials	41
Minutes of the meetings (MM)	MM is a record of meetings organized by the English department to address issues related to teaching, including assigning of teaching load, course content, classroom management, and assessments. Besides English teachers, the English department chair and, occasionally, the dean participate in the decisions deliberated on these meetings.	Academic officials, teachers	5
Continuity plans (CP)	CP is a working document prepared by teachers to identify teaching and learning modalities (synchronous or asynchronous), course topics to be covered focusing on most essential learning competencies, challenges encountered by teachers and students, and plan of action to manage difficulties in the virtual classroom.	Teachers	4
Orientation meeting presentation (OMP)	OMP is a PowerPoint presentation prepared by a teacher for the course orientation during the first meeting for the term. It includes slides on course description, intended learning outcomes, weekly teaching and learning activities, required readings, assessments, and class policies.	Teachers	19

Table 1 continued...

Document type (Code)	Description	Author/s	Number of texts
Course outline (CO)	CO is a document detailing the plan for an English language unit. It includes six elements: (1) the course description and rationale, (2) the macro-curriculum framework showing the alignment of the course intended learning outcomes with the program outcomes, course outcomes, and the three core values of the university; description highlighting the rationale, focus and outcome, (3) the teaching and learning matrix showing the topics and assessments to be covered for each week, (4) readings for the course, (5) assessments, and (6) class policies, including netiquette practices for virtual classes.	Teachers	19
Summary of weekly engagements (SWE)	SWE is a working document prepared by teachers reporting their planned and learning teaching activities for the week. Synchronous and asynchronous activities, as well as formative and summative assessments, are color-coded for ease of distinction.	Teachers	115
Total			203

4.3   Analysis Approach

After labelling each document type (e.g., IM01 for the first institutional memo during the identified timeframe, IM02 for the second, etc.), the first author began the inductive coding process. This involved the iterative reading of each document file and highlighting segments of text that demonstrate recurring ideas or themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Keywords and ideas that were found to be salient and recurrent across the six document types were highlighted. In other words, we paid attention to discourses that had prominent intertextual representation in the data set. The initial set of codes resulting from the first author's thematic analysis of the documents were then validated by the second and third authors, who also examined the entire data set of 203 documents. This approach contributed to the trustworthiness of the findings in two ways—first, through investigator triangulation where each researcher acted as a data analyst (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, & Neville, 2014) and second, through member checking (Creswell, 2005). As academic officials who participated in creating some of the examined institutional documents, the second and third authors were in a position to confirm and validate the first author's interpretation with their insider view, adding depth and variety to the analysis. Together, the authors selected representative excerpts for each identified theme, which we discuss next.

5.   Findings and Discussion

In this section, we discuss the four principles of the figured worlds framework (Holland et al., 1998) as applied in the context of online English language teaching in the Humanities and Social Sciences programs of a Philippine university. The first principle highlights the historical situatedness of this virtual curriculum. It is recognized as the product of a particular event, that is, the COVID-19 pandemic that started in 2020 and the continued global effort to manage its impact on education, among other domains. The activities that transpire in this site (second principle), the roles and relationships of students, teachers, and administrators as inhabitants of this figured world (third principle), and implications to identity construction (fourth principle) are expectedly different from the face-to-face experience. Differential priorities, values, views, and practices in this new world of English language teaching are reflected in the dominant themes that emerged from the analysis of relevant institutional documents.

Table 2
Themes in institutional documents related to the online English curriculum

Themes	IM	MM	CP	OMP	CO	SWE
Flexibility	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Heightened surveillance	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Increased collaboration	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Shared religious identity	✓			✓	✓	
Reality check	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Tension between flexibility and surveillance	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Student-centered orientation	✓	✓	✓	✓		

As shown in Table 2, the most salient themes are *flexibility*, *heightened surveillance*, and *increased collaboration*, which were reflected in all document types. Less recurrent but still important to note are the themes of *shared religious identity, reality check, tension between flexibility and surveillance, and student-centered orientation*. We now discuss each theme in turn.

5.1   Flexibility

One of the most prominent discourses found in the documents speaks of flexibility. This is captured in the following excerpts:

Excerpt 1

> …these implementing guidelines are **subject to change**, depending on the situation. (IM01, emphasis added)

Excerpt 2

> **Don't be overly restrictive with policies**, keeping an open mind to possible exceptions especially in this time of pandemic… (IM20, emphasis added)

Excerpt 3

> **Flexibility** shall be rendered in requiring submission of graded outputs… **in consideration of the status of students**. (IM28, emphasis added)

These excerpts demonstrate the notion of flexibility as linked to the easing of rules and restrictions, which would otherwise be strictly implemented outside the pandemic-induced online education system. For instance, while the examined memos provide guidelines for online course delivery, the memo writers explicitly stated that these policies are also "subject to change" [Excerpt 1] as the pandemic situation develops. Teachers are also reminded not to be "…overly restrictive with [their own class] policies" and to be considerate of exceptional cases [Excerpt 2]. This indicates that flexibility is a rule applied to both academic officials and teachers.

The need to be flexible is also reflected in the directive for teachers to "prioritize the most essential learning competencies" (IMO2). This imperative sanctions deviating from the original course plan. As an illustration, teachers of Purposive Communication, a general education course, agreed to "emphasize listening and speaking skills like public speaking, managing conflicts, formulating and performing multimodal tasks" (CO18) and revised the course outline accordingly. For Academic Writing, an elective course, the teachers decided to modify the final assessment. Whereas the course previously required students to produce a complete academic research article (with introduction, methods, results, discussion, and conclusion), the revised assessment includes only the introduction and methods sections (CO12). Besides simplifying the course targets, flexibility is also applied in submission protocols, exhorting teachers to consider the "status of students" [Excerpt 3] and to allow deadline extensions (CP01).

Overall, the discourse of flexibility as reflected in the documents is a call for pedagogical responsiveness in terms of policy creation and implementation, course planning, deployment of teaching and learning activities, as well as teacher roles. Enacting curricular flexibility in these varied ways is arguably necessary to facilitate the gradual socialization of academic officials, teachers, and students into the online ways of teaching, learning, and managing institutional functions.

The notion of flexibility also potentially resonates with what Holland et al. (1998) referred to as "space of authoring" (p. 63) or sites of agentive practice, where characters

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(in this case, academic officials and teachers) are able to create and enact "improvisational responses to social and cultural openings" (p. 270). While there is already the discourse of academic freedom that existed pre-pandemic, the pandemic-induced online education appears to modify or stretch this notion. Academic freedom has been generally understood as an institutional right of teachers and students which covers, among other things, the right to participate in academic engagements, to express their position in intellectual exchange, and to make pedagogical decisions consistent with their academic training, philosophy, and commitments—"without fear of censorship" (Nelson, 2010). Censorship, however, cannot be absolutely removed from the picture as it serves practical functions for managing various institutional concerns, including creating a communal sense of identity and producing quality education according to widely accepted standards in the higher education. In other words, while flexibility seems to minimize the idea of restriction, it does not completely erase the valuing of rules. In fact, the notion of control is equally emphasized in the examined documents.

5.2   Heightened Surveillance

Alongside the call to exercise discretion and docility is the notion of surveillance or monitoring, which appears to be much more than the usual practice in in-person education. The excerpts below illustrate this point.

Excerpt 4

> …consolidate **reports** as regards the following: (1) **alternative** teaching-learning engagements conducted by faculty and students; (2) survey of the **health status** of faculty members, students, and support staff; (3) students who were able and unable to **access or complete** alternative learning tasks, lessons, and activities. (IM01, emphasis added)

Excerpt 5

> Conduct a **pre-survey** of students…together with information on their **internet connectivity** and **available electronic equipment** (IM11, emphasis added)

Excerpt 6

> A systematic monitoring through **data analytics of faculty performance** in the delivery of online services must be implemented. (IM13, emphasis added)

As these excerpts demonstrate, academic officials and teachers are required to monitor several things: online teaching and learning activities, health status of members of the academic community, and students' access to online learning tasks [Excerpt 4]. The

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monitoring of these conditions and activities are evidenced through documentation. An example of this is the "pre-survey of students" [Excerpt 5], which is designed and done by teachers during the first meeting of the term. As part of the course orientation, teachers are told to gather information about each students' internet connectivity situation, including who their internet provider is and what sort of devices are available to them for use in online classes. While teachers monitor their students, academic officials, in turn, monitor the teachers. One way this is done is through "data analytics" embedded in the learning management systems, which monitor their teaching performance [Excerpt 6], including whether, what, and when they upload materials in the course sites.

The setting up of monitoring and evaluation systems to ensure compliance and implementation of policy is not new. This, too, was noted by Pennington (2007) in her critique of the 'No-child-left-behind' policy and the figured world it created which emphasized accountability for results. In the case of online English teaching, this emphasis on accountability translates to increased monitoring tasks, which adds to the role and workload of teachers and academic officials. The priority for surveillance has also led to the creation of new kinds of documents or reports, including two of the document types examined in this study: continuity plans and summary of weekly engagements (see Table 1).

The next theme appears to provide a way to manage the added burden contributed by the new rules and rituals of surveillance.

5.3 Increased Collaboration and Shared Religious Identity

The third theme reflected across all the documents analyzed is increased collaboration. This discourse encourages participants in the academic community to work closely together.

Excerpt 7

> We understand that some of us may have struggled to shift to remote instruction, and our students likewise struggled to cope. We reiterate our commitment to deliver the best service we can [give] our main stakeholders, our students, and we **need to help each other for this to be successful, for the benefit of our learners**. …. For this to be realized, the **collective effort** of everyone is needed.
> Faculty members teaching the same course are **encouraged to work together to discuss revisions**…
> **The University is working with telecommunications companies** for the possibility of improving internet services in areas where most students and faculty members encounter weak internet connections.
> **Share with your fellow faculty members the materials** you have already provided to students… (IM02, emphasis added)

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Excerpt 8

> ...the **spirit of dialogue and communion** prevail between and among the faculty members and students so that both are able to meet course expectations without compromising scholarship and their welfare (M21, emphasis added)

Excerpt 7 explicitly situates the call for collaboration in the context of transitioning to remote instruction. It is constructed as a necessity in order to successfully manage the challenges of adapting to online learning. It is also appended to the valuing of students as the "main stakeholders" or the valued clients of the education system. Toward this aim, collaboration is applied in various levels of institutional relationships—among teachers, especially those delivering the same or related courses, and also between the university and third parties, in this case, telecommunications companies. The latter suggests that the figured world of online English teaching includes not only curricular participants but also members of the online technology enterprise as providers of the service that is now central to the delivery of the curriculum.

Excerpt 8 provides another dimension to this rhetoric by using religious language, which may be seen as a way of enacting the university's religious affiliation. "The spirit of dialogue and communion" is a cultural phrasing of the notion of collaboration that potentially appeals to the sense of solidarity rooted in the Catholic identity. Although not all members of this university are Catholic or practicing Catholics, this religious identity significantly shapes ideologies and discourse (re)produced in the institution. This anchoring on the shared Catholic identity is further elaborated in the next excerpt.

Excerpt 9

> …we collectively realize our goals as one…community and ensure that we remain consistent with our identity as a Catholic university … Always be mindful how our words and our actions affect our image as a person, as a member of the academic community, and the image of the University we belong to. …We can refer back to the teachings of the Church on good behavior, ethics, and morals as we discern what we intend to post or share. (IM40)

The use of "we" linguistically emphasizes the sense of inclusivity that supports the discourse of collaboration. References to "our goals," "our identity, and "our image" underline team performance (Goffman, 1990), which is tied to the university's Catholic identity. This social identifier, which is largely publicized, is proposed as the standard for legitimizing certain words and actions that are deployed and enacted both in face-to-face and in virtual interactions.

Another site for the application of collaboration is assessments. The summary of weekly engagements examined indicates a number of collaborative activities. This includes group presentations and collaborative writing (SWE31), peer critique (SWE36), and role

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playing (SWE41). The social component of these learning activities may be a strategic way of compensating for the interpersonal aspect of in-person classroom instruction that is often cited as lacking in virtual classes.

In brief, the discourse of collaboration is constructed as a solution to the difficulties of navigating the online curriculum. It is seen as a way for participants in the virtual learning environment to support each other and a way to compensate for the physical socialization that is sorely missed in this digitized figured world (Blum, 2020).

Overall, the notions of flexibility, surveillance, and collaboration that dominate the online English curricular discourse are supported and justified by the pandemic context, which is foregrounded in the next theme.

5.4   Reality Check

The extra-curricular realities, especially the pandemic and its wide-ranging repercussions, is highlighted in the following excerpts.

Excerpt 10

> …considering that there might be further **psychological, physiological, and technical challenges** everyone has to contend with, it is deemed best that: only *reasonable and minimal asynchronous* engagements be held from… (IM21, emphasis added)

Excerpt 11

> In redesigning instruction, we acknowledge the **unique context of online learning, the challenges of technology use, the physical and social factors that affect the learning environment, and the influence and distraction brought about by social media.** (IM35, emphasis added)

Excerpt 12

> Most of them [students] would complain that **they don't have enough [money] for food**. Therefore, [they] would rather spend what they have for food instead of going to an internet café or buy data. **Some live in places with no internet connection**. And some other more personal reasons. (CP01, emphasis added)

These excerpts acknowledge the different challenges that are part of the "unique context of online learning" [Excerpt 10]. Among the realities underscored are the physiological impact of the highly transmissible virus, the psychological effect of the losses the pandemic has caused and the many lifestyle changes that everyone had to adapt to suddenly, the technical difficulties of navigating new Web 2.0 technologies with limited internet connection, and the economic poverty that has worsened partly due to lockdown-related job losses. While

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some of these challenges were differentially experienced in pre-pandemic times, there is notably increased sensitivity to them in the figured world of online teaching. This is reflected, for instance, in discourses valuing mental health and the need for greater accessibility to compensate for restricted physical socializing.

While these difficulties were differentially experienced in pre-pandemic times, there appears to be greater sensitivity to them. Such discourse has the effect of engendering a sense of compassion, the sensitivity to the plight of others beyond the curricular context. This extra consideration for the other issues that participants are simultaneously coping with supports the team message, 'We're all in this together.' It also justifies the discourse of flexibility and practices heightening surveillance, which in some cases appear to be in tension.

5.5   Tension between Flexibility and Surveillance

Flexibility, which emphasizes the looseness of rules, seemingly conflicts with the rules of surveillance that are simultaneously deployed by policy makers, as demonstrated in this excerpt.

Excerpt 13

> As our response to the request of our students, we [academic officials] would like to gently remind the faculty…**be more considerate of students** who have unstable internet connectivity, **strictly follow the schedule** of asynchronous and synchronous classes… (IM23, emphasis added)

Highlighted in this memo extract are two reminders—to be mindful of the reality that students may have limited access to the internet, and to comply with their course plan, particularly as regards the timing of the synchronous and asynchronous sessions. A reading of this excerpt suggests that while teachers are expected to be considerate of students' limitations, they are in turn expected to "strictly follow" the class schedule as reflected in the summary of weekly engagements. This imperative for strict compliance seems to disregard potential connectivity issues that teachers also encounter. In fact, weak internet is reportedly one of the major issues that teachers struggle to manage in synchronous online discussions (Rinesko & Muslim, 2020). Yet the concern for this side of the picture appears to be secondary, suggesting a kind of double standard in the discourse of flexibility for students and for teachers. Teachers are called to be flexible with students but are themselves not given much flexibility.

Another factor supporting this double standard is the surveillance of teachers simultaneously enforced by administrators and students. In this figured world, teachers—as entextualized in institutional documents—are designated as facilitators of learning and managers of the virtual classroom. But less patently acknowledged is the fact that in this space, students also manage the managers by directly reporting any practices by teachers that even slightly deviate from the published policies. As validated by the experience of

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the authors in their role as academic administrators, complaint letters about teachers have been directly submitted by students to the dean's office or, worse, the office of academic affairs. This practice is a revision of the grievance protocol, which typically involves direct consultation with the teacher concerned before the matter is brought to the attention of the department chair. Only if the case is still not resolved at that stage is it elevated to the dean or the academic affairs official. With this practice modified by students, teachers are at the mercy of heightened scrutiny even from their students who now appear to exercise greater power over them. This indexes a reversal of power relations between teachers and students in the online English curriculum.

This finding calls for the provision of some support or compassionate measures to lighten the burden of teachers and to moderate the power play among the characters in this figured world. For instance, current requirements asked of teachers may be streamlined to reduce the amount of digital paperwork that they need to do. Also, affording teachers space to attend to their own personal matters may be done by not sending work emails or setting meetings and seminars during weekends and academic breaks. Finally, a review of the grievance protocols is necessary to discourage students' practice of by-passing certain levels of decision makers in complaint resolution.

While recognizing the need to moderate the expectations placed on the shoulders of teachers through these kinds of measures, the noted intersection of flexibility and surveillance also has an important implication on the kind of agency that teachers can exercise in the online curriculum. Defined as "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn, 2001, p. 112), agency is a social construct (re)shaped by the context in which it is exercised (Wong, Athanases, & Banes, 2020). While English teachers may appear to have less agency in the online curriculum because of the impressions of surveillance created by multiple monitoring practices, the figured world of online teaching potentially provides new ways of exercising agency. For instance, the monitoring done through continuity plans also provides a way for teachers to send feedback and report students' concerns to policy makers. This report, in turn, can potentially motivate changes in guidelines disseminated as can be gleaned from comparing these two extracts.

Excerpt 14

> Class attendance (synchronous meetings) is mandatory. Good academic standing requires the presence of students at all synchronous classes and workshop meetings (CO07)

Excerpt 15

> Student attendance shall be checked only for purposes of monitoring their status. (IM30)

Excerpt 14 is a class policy reflected in a course outline in compliance with an earlier guideline issued by academic officials making class attendance "mandatory" for students. This attendance policy, however, is modified in Excerpt 15, which is extracted from a memorandum issued later.

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This shift can be attributed to changes in the general circumstances of teaching and learning online. Possibly, feedback on realities influencing curricular engagement, such as limited resources to support increased internet needs [Excerpt 11], contributed to this policy change. This goes to show that in the figured world of online English teaching, policies tend to be less stable and fixed. The elasticity of rules in online education resonates with reported challenges in balancing contextual, teacher- and student-related conditions in order to realize flexibility in a blended curriculum (Jonker, März, & Voogt, 2020).

All in all, these noted tensions between flexibility and surveillance have potential implications in policy making practices and in teacher identity construction linked to the expansion of the online English teacher's roles, motivated by the enlarged priority for the student's well-being.

5.6   Student-centered Orientation

Emphasizing the value of students as the "main stakeholders" [Excerpt 7] in the education system draws attention to the social hierarchy in the domain where the students are positioned at the top. This student-centered orientation is exemplified in the following excerpts:

Excerpt 16
> …for students who do not have internet access, we urge you [teachers] to **go the extra mile** and contact them through phone so you can give them guidance on… (IM02)

Excerpt 17
> … it is important for teachers to **probe the reasons why the student is unable** to participate in class so the faculty can make informed decisions on appropriate interventions. (IM16)

These excerpts highlight the concern for students' welfare expressed through actions that show teachers "go[ing] the extra mile," that is, doing more than what they would usually do in a no-pandemic, face-to-face teaching situation. For example, probing the reason for students' non-participation in class is something that higher education teachers usually do not concern themselves with because of assumptions that at the level of university education, students are already self-motivated. With this idea, university instructors tend to focus on developing and teaching content rather than classroom management or discipline, an education priority that is more salient in primary and secondary levels. That the individual life circumstances of university learners are now part of the accountability of English teachers suggests an expansion of the online teacher's role and identity.

This increased focus on the learner is, however, different to the notion of learner-centeredness promoted in student-centered pedagogies (Hoidn & Reusser, 2020). In fact, it appears to usher a return to teacher-centered pedagogies. Whereas student-centered pedagogy encourages learner autonomy, the extension of the teacher's role beyond curricular content

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and delivery potentially reduces opportunities for students to exercise self-directed learning. Furthermore, the emphasis on the accountability of teachers for learners' scholarship and well-being not only places the sage back on the frontstage (that is, the virtual classroom) but also spotlights their room on the backstage (that is, beyond the classroom).

6. Conclusion

Figured worlds are culturally constructed realms where "identities are figured [and] significance is granted to particular discourses and practices, and particular outcomes are valued over others" (Price & McNeill, 2013, p.503). Adopting this understanding, we argue that the online English curriculum is a figured world where specific discourses are prioritized, distinct practices are developed, and identities are (re)shaped.

Examining institutional documents created during the transition to 100% online English curriculum in a Manila-based university, we discovered that this figured world prioritizes greater flexibility, surveillance, collaboration, student focus, and sensitivity to evolving individual and collective social circumstances. The simultaneous valuing of multiple curricular and extra-curricular matters has sanctioned the creation of new rules, rituals, and genres. For example, conducting pre-survey of students' connectivity status is now part of the course orientation. Netiquette rules are now included in the class policies documented in course outlines. Course assessments are simplified and capitalize on collaborative work while assessment tasks are limited to at least four per term. Teachers are also required to prepare summaries of weekly engagements, a new artifact of monitoring, and to 'go the extra mile' to inquire into reasons and create interventions for individual students' participation challenges. These new practices are added on top of teachers' usual roles in lesson preparation, content delivery, assessment preparation and marking, and research engagements. Of course, like their students, they, too, have extra-curricular concerns, which however appears to be of secondary import. This differential valuing of learners' and teachers' circumstances foregrounds the social hierarchy in online education, where the learner comes first. This heightened care for students seems to create conditions for a return to teacher-centered pedagogies, where the online English teacher plays a more central role in determining what and how students learn.

This study further proposes that while teachers are, in fact, burdened by extra accountabilities and double surveillance by academic officials and by students, there is room for agency and potential authoring of new directions and discourses. As teachers ourselves, we see the enlarged discourse of flexibility as an important opportunity to extend compassion not only to students but also to teachers. As social agents in the middle of the institutional hierarchy, standing between administrators and students, teachers can be easily overwhelmed with expectations and responsibilities coming from both sides of the structure. This double standard of flexibility calls for some practical approaches to lighten the burden of virtual English language teachers while continuing to prioritize students' learning. An example of a practical teaching approach is increased collaboration among teachers in designing integrated assessments. With this practice, the connections of learning outcomes across units

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are emphasized, students have less requirements to accomplish, and teachers, in turn, have reduced marking duties. We see this development as a step in the right direction. In addition, we believe that teachers' feedback and suggestions, and respect for their need of uninterrupted days-off should be accommodated in the (re)design and valuation of policies and practices, enabling them to play a more active role in co-shaping this figured world rather than simply being (re)shaped by it.

Further studies in this area may consider examining interactional data, including observation of online classes, to analyze whether and how that the entextualized themes discussed in this paper are enacted in the virtual classroom. Teacher evaluation by students, an institutional instrument that tends to be viewed as a device of power by students, is another potential data that can extend the understanding of this figured world. This kind of artifact may shed light on how students participate in co-shaping online English learning, a figured world that is still evolving.

With the possibly continued online staging of the English language curriculum, at least in the foreseeable future in the Philippines, it is important to continue exploring the discourses, practices, and ideologies that are shaped by and which, in turn, shape the characters that inhabit this digital world.

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