A Phenomenological Study on the Experiences of Students in the Delivery of Online Learning

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ABSTRACT

This study determined students' lived experiences in online learning delivery during the pandemic. The phenomenological research design was used in the study. The participants were chosen using the technique of purposive sampling, with 10 students participating in the in-depth interview and 7 students taking part in the focus group discussion. The research resulted in the discovery of three themes that emerged from the participants' lived experiences. These themes focus on the benefits of online learning, concerns regarding technology, and worries over instructional management. In addition, the students are able to overcome the challenges that they have when attending online classes by applying both personal and social coping strategies. Furthermore, better interaction with classmates and instructors as the insights they can share as a result of their experiences during online classes. Finally, based on the key challenges discussed, implications of the findings/ recommendations were suggested.

Keywords: *Phenomenology, Students, Lived Experiences, Delivery of Online Learning, Covid-19 Pandemic, Davao City, Philippines*

INTRODUCTION

Coronavirus (COVID-19), a highly contagious disease that poses a global danger, is considered the third pandemic of the twenty-first century (Perlman, 2020). It has affected every element of human life around the world, including education (Paudel, 2020). Due to the significant threat to human life and health posed by this virus, most governments around the world had to temporarily close (in 150 countries) educational institutions or switch to alternate delivery methods in a short time to protect vulnerable students, staff, and faculty populations. As a result, global higher education faced significant challenges that impacted hundreds of millions of learners (Crawford et al., 2020; Sahu, 2020; UNESCO, 2020).

As the COVID-19 pandemic spreads, more people are turning to online education as the only choice available (Martinez, 2020). Informal and non-formal schooling is also impacted significantly. However, it is a widely held belief that no pedagogical approach can fully replace formal education because of the direct interaction between instructor and student. However, following the COVID-19 crisis, online education evolved into a pedagogical change from old methods to a modern approach to teaching-learning, moving from the classroom to Zoom/ Meet, from personal to virtual, and from seminars to webinars (Mishra et al., 2020).

In Norway, the physical shutdown of universities and university colleges on March 12, 2020, has hastened the transition to online teaching and learning methods. (Langfor, Damşa, 2020). In addition, educational institutions in India began transitioning to an online teaching environment soon after their government decided to enforce a nationwide lockdown for 21 days beginning March 25, 2020, which was later prolonged for another 19 days (Muthuprasad et al., 2020).

Previous research has indicated that students who are enrolled in online programs are subject to a variety of problems. In an Asian study, Alawamleh et al. (2020) revealed in their study that the issues included a lack of interest on the part of the students, difficulty to comprehend the content covered in the course, a reduction in the amount of communication that occurs between the students and their lecturers, and a belief that they are attending class by themselves. Moreover, the abrupt change also resulted in gaps in access to education aided by technology, particularly for students with lower incomes (Barada et al., 2020). In addition, the use of online learning led to excessive material in the lessons, a reduction in students' overall well-being, and a lack of engagement among the students (Teras et al., 2020).

Though several studies have been conducted on the experiences of students in online learning (Alawamleh et al.,2020; Barada et al., 2020; Teras et al., 2020), further research is required for additional information to be gleaned regarding the issues of online learning based on the experiences of students. In addition, there hasn't been much research conducted in the Philippines that focuses on students taking part in the study, as some are concentrated on healthcare workers (Biana & Joaquin; Acob, 2020; Labrague & De los Santos, 2020). Thus, this study aimed to determine the lived experiences of college students on the online delivery of teaching during the pandemic.

In light of the foregoing scenario, academic institutions may find this research beneficial in determining the sentiments of college students in the delivery of online teaching. The findings of this study can thus be used by school administrators to devise methods to meet the problems and difficulties that college students face with online teaching delivery during the pandemic. Furthermore, this research can assist school administrators in developing a targeted intervention, particularly in areas that have been identified as being critical in college students' academic lives.

Research Questions

This study aimed to know the lived experiences of college students in online teaching delivery during the pandemic. Specifically, it sought answers to the following questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of participants during online classes?

2. How do they manage the challenges in the online learning environment?

3. What are the insights that can be shared by the participants from their experiences in

    the online class?

FRAMEWORK

In order for students to successfully navigate the unprecedented obstacles that they will encounter throughout COVID-19, they will need to strike a delicate balance between maintaining their overall well-being, accomplishing their academic goals, and meeting the requirements of their jobs. The Self-Determination Theory, sometimes referred to as SDT, was developed by Deci and Ryan. As a consequence, their reasons to continue learning in spite of hurdles can be described by this theory (1985).

The SDT is supported by a foundational epistemology, and at the core of this epistemology are the three tenets of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy refers to the sensation of being in charge of the activities that are now taking place; it is voluntary and upholds the belief that the achievement of goals is driven mostly by intrinsic incentives. Competence, on the other hand, asserts that a person's behavior in achieving their goals is dependent on their capacity to appraise their talents, knowledge, and mastery, all of which can improve through feedback. The theory of competence holds that this ability is founded on feedback. A person's need to feel as though they belong in a community, particularly in a society in which their links with individuals who are part of a social group can provide access to support that helps them fulfill their aims and goals, is referred to as relatedness.

Even if it is arguable that the degree to which an individual values each component of SDT varies from person to person, it is still the case that possessing these three motivational drivers can contribute to an individual's success in achieving their own particular goals and objectives (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). SDT is an appropriate theoretical foundation for elucidating the findings of this investigation (Chen and Jang, 2010; Martin et al., 2018), as prior research has utilized it to explain the adaptability, technological advantage, and various affordances of the online learning environment (Chen and Jang, 2010; Martin et al., 2018). (Chen and Jang, 2010; Martin et al., 2018).

METHOD

Research design

This qualitative research study employed the phenomenological research design. This design method interprets an experience or fact, by listening to the different stories of the participants (Creswell, 2007). It will describe the structures of experience as they present themselves to consciousness, without recourse to theory, deduction, or assumption from other disciplines. Hence, the approach will examine the phenomena through subjective participants that would describe the meaning of the experiences of several individuals about a concept or phenomenon (Creswell, 2007).

In this study, the phenomenological design was used to determine the lived experiences, the ways how the participants manage the challenges in online learning, and the insights that can be shared by the participants from their experiences in the online class.

Participants

The students who were enrolled in online learning delivery were considered participants of the study. A total of 17 students were selected using the purposive sampling technique. With the selection criteria, there were ten (10) students who participated in the in-depth interview and seven (7) in the focus group discussion (FGD). As Creswell (2013) states, the best sample size for a phenomenological study is between 5 to 25 participants.

Data Collection Tools

In order to collect the data, interview guide questions were formulated to collect sufficient data. In order to supplement the result of the study, the interview consisted of three questions pertaining to the lived experiences of participants during online classes, how they manage the challenges in the online learning environment, and insights that can be shared by the participants from their experiences in the online class. The researchers also made sure that the utilized guide questions during the interview and group discussion does not contain any derogatory, discriminating, or unacceptable language that could be offensive to any of the participants of the study. Moreover, the formulated guide questions undergo validation with the experts and are then translated into the participants' language (Bisaya).

Data Analysis

This study used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006), where it requires the transcription of interview recordings and following coding stages, the researcher reads and re-reads the transcripts in order to identify potential themes. By following the six steps in the thematic analysis method developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) in analyzing the data that is gathered in this study. The steps are familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up. According to Braun and Clarke (2012), thematic analysis is a good approach to research where you are trying to find out something about people's views, opinions, knowledge, experiences, or values from a set of qualitative. Moreover, Salleh, et al (2017) supported the statement of Braun and Clarke (2012) that Thematic Analysis is an established method of organizing qualitative data and has good potential in capturing the knowledge and experience of workers and experts. Therefore, to attain good results, the researchers should use appropriate tools in analyzing qualitative data.

Ethical Considerations

This study followed research ethics to protect research subjects from injury and doubt. Assured the participants that the activity and their identities would be kept private.

Furthermore, after notifying the participants about the study and issuing consent forms for them to sign, they will agree to engage in the interview and focus group discussion provided they understand the objectives. Furthermore, the participants will be assured of the activity's confidentiality, with code names being used to maintain privacy and anonymity.

Furthermore, the researchers notified the participants about the study and provided a discussion for them to understand the objective. Meanwhile, a consent form was presented and participants agreed prior to the conduct of the interview and focus group discussion. Moreover, the participants were assured of the activity's confidentiality, with code names being used to maintain privacy and anonymity.

Trustworthiness of the Study

In each study, researchers should establish the protocols and procedures necessary for a study to be considered worthy of consideration by readers (Amankwaa, 2016). Hence, the four components of trustworthiness were considered: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility. Researchers assured that the completeness and accuracy of the data are obtained. Credibility refers to the truth of the data or the participant views and the interpretation and representation of them by the researcher (Polit & Beck, 2012)

Transferability. Researchers secured the completeness and disclosure of the final document of the study. As defined by Houghton et al., Transferability refers to findings that can be applied to other settings or groups (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013; Polit & Beck, 2012). Researchers should provide sufficient information on the informants and the research context to enable the reader to assess the findings' capability of being "fit" or transferable.

Dependability. Researchers are accountable and committed to the study. Assures that the data is reliable and accurate. Dependability refers to the constancy of the data over similar conditions (Polit & Beck, 2012; Tobin & Begley, 2004). Through the researcher's process and descriptions, a study would be deemed dependable if the study findings were replicated with similar participants in similar conditions (Koch, 2006).

Confirmability. Researchers assured the completeness and accuracy of the analysis and interpretations of the study. Confirmability refers to the researcher's ability to demonstrate that the data represent the participants' responses and not the researcher's biases or viewpoints (Polit & Beck, 2012; Tobin & Begley, 2004).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Lived Experiences of Participants during Online Classes

As can be gleaned in Table 1, there are three themes that emerged from interviews with the participants regarding their experiences during online classes, namely: tremendous advantages on a personal, technological, and instructional level, technical issues, and instructional management concerns.

Tremendous advantages on a personal, technological, and instructional level. A number of participants have expressed satisfaction with the benefits they have received from taking classes online because of the convenience it affords them. For example, some students said:

> *"Online is a great thing for me because I am very busy, and the classes are not too demanding. I am able to find balance between work and family. Online classes allow me to do that." (FGD 3)*

> *"We can take as much time as we want to complete it. We don't have to be there at a certain time, and we can take breaks whenever we need to." (FGD 5)*

Another student remarked that she found it easy to follow the courses because she have less effort waking up or doing personal stuffs, as she stated:

> *"The fact that I can complete my personal tasks at my own pace while attending online classes is one of the many benefits of taking such classes. (FGD 2)*

Others, on the other hand, find that the use of technology to access their coursework and materials, in addition to taking part in online classes, makes the learning process much more manageable for them than more conventional approaches. Some students quotes as follows:

> *"Using the many different LMS platforms, I am able to quickly access a variety of tools and information." (FGD 2)*

> *"Using online tools allows me to conveniently hand in my homework, fulfill any requirements, and complete other tasks." (FGD 3)*

Some students feel that the level of assistance they receive from their teachers is higher in online classes. As they stated:

> *"My teachers for the online program are very nice people, and they are able to provide support to me at the times when I need it the most, which is when I am having trouble understanding the subject" (FGD 2)*

> *"Our teachers provide us lecture materials to support our learning (FGD 3)*

This findings on the positive advantages of online learning conforms to the study of Gautam and Tiwari (2016), Martínez-Caro, Cegarra-Navarro and Cepeda-Carrión (2015) and Sung and Chang (2016) that online learning makes it possible to observe more flexible

learning approaches to go for classes without going to physical classroom. The students are able to participate actively in the learning process and gain a more in-depth understanding of the material through interactive video, email, and other online softwares.

Technical Issues. During their time in online classes, many students struggle with a variety of technical obstacles, most frequently those relating to connectivity and their various electronic devices. Students find it especially difficult to deal with these kinds of problems when they are attempting to attend an online class that they are currently enrolled in. The following are some of their narratives:

> *"My internet connection is fluctuation especially during peak hours" (FGD 5)*

> *"LMS cannot be access in my cellphone" (FGD 3)*

> *"Slow internet connections can affect my gadget performance" (FGD 2)*

This finding on technical issues is congruent to the study of Raes et al. (2019) that one of the issues in online learning may be the possible disparity in access to digital learning tools for students who dwell in different areas. Some students may be located in a "dead spot" with a very weak or nonexistent internet connection, a relevant issue in the context of online delivery. Furthermore, the overloading of subscribers can result to weakening of internet connection (Rasheed et al., 2020).

Instructional Management Concerns. Despite the fact that a number of students receive helpful support from their teachers, there are a few who have voiced their concerns about the administration of their educational experiences, specifically in relation to difficulties concerning time tables and educational resources. One student appear to be quite troubled on scheduling, as she stated:

> *"Some teachers are posting the attendance late. Hence, some students do not come early since attendance are not strictly monitored on time" (FGD 1)*

In addition, some students are concerned about the availability of instructional materials because many teachers merely present the lessons without sharing the lecture resources with the students. For example, some students said:

> *"I cannot find the resources that was lectured to us by our teachers" (IDI 5)*

> *"The lecture materials are not shared to us most of the time" (FGD 6)*

On the other hand, one student expressed her concerns about their academic performance since some teachers are not providing them their grades. This is evident in the narrative of one student as shown below:

> *"I am not sure about my performance in class because some of our teachers are not giving the results of our quizzes and exams" (FGD 4)*

This results are common complaints of students to the instructional delivery especially that sudden shift have made certain adjustments for both learners and teachers. As a matter of fact, as disclosed in the research conducted by Rapanta et al. (2020), it was found that due to sudden unusual work environments, teachers may find time in organizing their instructional delivery, and some teachers are still adjusting to the new technology, such as the use of learning management systems, which resulted to student dissatisfaction.

Table 1. Lived Experiences of Participants During Online Classes

Issues Probed	Core Ideas	Codes	Theme
On the experiences of students in online learning	- Well-situated because the class was conducted at home. - Having more time for self, family, and other activities - No need to exert effort like waking up early or taking a bath	Personal Convenience	Tremendous advantages on a personal, technological, and instructional level
	- can submit assignments, requirements, and the likes easily using online applications - Having easy access to online applications such as Google Meet, Google Class, Google Record, Google Forms and some other online applications - Can access online platforms anytime with all the availability of the materials anywhere in the country including the comforts of their own home.	Learning convenience thru technology	
	- teachers are considerate especially when students lose an internet connection - teachers provide alternative online learning materials such as video recordings - teachers are approachable	Teacher Support	
	- using a slow cellphone during classes - camera and microphone are switched off - LMS limitations in some mobile phones - inefficiency of gadgets	Device and platform inadequacies	Technical issues
	- slow and fluctuating internet connection - network disruptions - only using limited internet data	Connectivity problems	

			Instructional Management Concerns
	- Posting of the attendance sheet is late. - No materials are given. - Class activities or assignments are posted outside of scheduled class time without prior notice. - Does not show grades for student monitoring purposes.	Lack of Resource Materials	

Managing the Difficulties of Online Classes

A single theme has become apparent in how the students manage the difficulties during online classes which involves personal and social strategies (see Table 2). This theme has two codes, namely: optimistic attitude and social support.

The participants have reached the consensus that having a positive attitude toward online learning is essential to their readiness and their engagement in distance education. They feel that if they keep a positive attitude, it will be easier for them to overcome the obstacles that they have faced while using the online learning platform. For example, some students said:

> *"Even though I've been through a lot of challenges, I've been able to motivate myself, and things are looking wonderful if you're motivated to do it." (FGD 2)*

> *"Thinking positively reduces my anxiety during online classes, and I am more motivated to perform well overall as a result of this." (FGD 4)*

This finding indicates that students have the ability to manage themselves despite the hurdles that they have experienced in online learning, which resulted in them overcoming the obstacles. This finding is consistent with Marghitan and Crasovan (2014), that students who are able to control their mood, avoidance or resentment reactions to certain tasks, feelings of frustration, and emotional reactions to success or failure are those who have higher levels of self-motivation and persistence in the process of learning.

On the other hand, some participants find it reassuring to seek help from others, such as their classmates, neighbors, and teachers, when they are confronted with challenges that are related to their educational pursuits. The participants stated as follows:

> *"In most cases, I communicate with my classmates, particularly with topics that we cover in our classes that I am unable to grasp." (IDI 4)*

> *"I ask for help from my neighbors when my connection became unstable" (IDI 3)*

> *"I usually communicate with my teachers when I have concerns during online classes." (FGD 5)*

This finding supported the works of Ren et al. (2020) that positive coping strategies are more likely to be used by students when they receive a high level of emotional support from their families and friends. On the other hand, when students have difficulties with the

dependability of their friends and communication with their families, they are less likely to use positive coping strategies.

Table 2. Managing the Difficulties of Online Learning

Issues Probed	Core Ideas	Codes	Theme
On how they managed the difficulties of online classes	- Motivating their self - Thinking positively despite the situation	Optimistic Attitude	Personal and Social Strategies
	- Reaching out to their classmates to ask for assistance in online classes - Ask for neighbor's help like connecting to their WIFI or using their equipment - Informing Teachers about the situation, especially when the internet connection is not available	Social support	

Insights of the Participants

Table 3 depicts better interaction with classmates and instructors as the salient theme of their insights as a result of their experiences during online classes. This theme generates two codes, namely: peer communication and teacher communication.

The participants have reported having more positive and useful interactions with their peers, as well as better access to their teachers and more effective contact with them, in comparison to their experiences in traditional on-campus classes. Some students described their interactions with their other students as significantly more positive and, in fact, further reaching. This is evident in the following narratives:

> *"I have more relevant conversations with my classmates relating to our subjects during online classes as compared to my experiences before when there's face-to-face classes."*

> *"We often communicate and help each other, especially on difficult lessons"*

Several participants expressed that they are having better interaction with their instructors. Even if a student's interaction with a teacher was less frequent than their interactions with other students in the online class, they observed that students and instructors conversed more frequently online than in traditional classroom settings.

"I often communicate with my teacher during this time in the virtual environment rather than before when there's on-campus classes" (FGD 3)

"I find frequent coordination with my teachers relevant in the online environment" (IDI 4)

This finding suggests that communication between classmates and teachers is vital in the online approach to ensure that everybody will know the status of classes and their academic success. As is the case in any other type of classroom setting, it is essential for online instructors to provide learners with timely and specific feedback on the work they have turned in. This enables learners to evaluate the extent to which they have mastered the subject matter covered in the course as well as identify any areas in which they are lacking in either knowledge or understanding. Hence, this conforms to the findings of Ritter and Polnick (2008) that online learning communities provide opportunities for connections in several ways: instructor to students, students to the instructor, and students to students, and thus communication plays an essential role in the success of the teaching and learning activities.

Table 3. Insights of the Participants Pertaining to Online Classes

Issues Probed	Core Ideas	Codes	Theme
On their insights and learnings from their experiences	- Conversing with classmates relating to the lessons - Having great camaraderie inside the classroom - Helping each other inside the virtual classroom during recitations	Peer communication	Better interactions with classmates and instructors
	- Often consulting my teachers on the lessons - Coordinating always with my teachers especially when there are technical difficulties - Asking teachers to share online resources	Teacher communication	

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of the study highlight two implications for the faculty and administrators. The first implication that can be drawn from this study pertains to faculty and the methods that they use to instruct their classes conducted in an online setting. Regarding their time spent in the virtual classroom, the participants who took part in this study had a range of opinions and perspectives to share. When viewed from the point of view of the researcher, I believe that the obligation belongs to the faculty member. Despite the challenges presented, faculty members

should look at measures to ensure that students continue to receive an education of sufficient quality. Constantly checking for understanding could ensure that students have a solid understanding of the concept. This proactive approach by the teachers may motivate students to strengthen their drive in pursuing their education through online courses.

The second implication has to do with the administrators of the institution. According to the findings of this study, it may be time for academic administrators to have serious talks about the challenges that students face in an online learning environment and to look for ways to become engaged as part of the solution. Administrators should look to those schools that have proven to be leaders in resolving the challenges faced by students participating in distant learning and model their own policies and procedures after such institutions. This is not a particularly recent issue for administrators working in higher education, and there are practical answers that may be discovered and implemented. However, in order to accomplish this goal, academic administrators will first need to acknowledge the existence of a problem that calls for a solution.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite the limited scope of this research, it was able to shed light on a topic that has not been given nearly as much consideration in the past. This topic is the perspectives and experiences of students who participate in distance classes. Additional research could concentrate on both qualitative and quantitative approaches to the same problem. It is my opinion that additional qualitative research should be carried out either on a more extensive scale or in collaboration with a greater number of educational institutions. The lived experiences of the people who participated in this research and were interviewed for this study were the primary emphasis of this study, and future studies could follow this model.

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