

In a road of trying times: Unraveling the lived experiences of students in the new normal

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ABSTRACT

The majority of educational systems worldwide have shifted to remote learning as a preventative strategy against the spread of coronavirus disease (COVID-19). This phenomenon is producing a lot of difficulties, as articulated by students in developing nations. Thus, this qualitative study sought to explore and understand the difficulties encountered by college students in Quirino State University in Philippines under the new normal of education. A total of 85 participants were purposely and conveniently selected to participate in an electronic survey through Google Forms. Further, to qualify and clarify responses from the respondents, the researchers conducted phone call interviews. The data were evaluated qualitatively using the NVIVO software. The findings revealed that the student's difficulties in the new normal can be summed in 10 significant themes, namely: i) Vague module content; ii) Poor internet connectivity; iii) Lack of teacher's guidance and motivation; iv) Financial problems; v) Stress/psychological pressure; vi) Insufficient learning materials; vii) Overloaded academic activities; viii) Conflict with household chores; ix) Personal factors; and x) Poor and inadequate learning environment. On the other hand, students' coping strategies had four major themes, namely: i) Managing time wisely; ii) Having self-discipline; iii) Taking time for a break; and iv) Seeking help from others.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has created an unprecedented problem in every sector. In the realm of education, this emergency has resulted in the widespread suspension of face-to-face operations by educational institutions in over 190 countries to stop the spread of the virus and reduce its effects [1]. Further, [2] reported that school and university closures had impacted more than 1.5 billion learners of all ages. Shutdowns have disproportionately affected young people.

With the primary goal of providing education as a fundamental human right, educational systems worldwide have been challenged to develop new ways to sustain education efforts [1] immediately. However, this does not include providing answers to individual student difficulties. In general, the educational system appears unprepared, which may have unintended implications during and after the crisis [3]. This reaction may include, but is not limited to, curriculum adjustments, the supply of technical resources and infrastructure, calendar shifts, and instructional delivery and assessment standards [4].

The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) of the Philippines introduced many ways of learning delivery. Flexible learning is one of these modes when standard teaching methods are unavailable, such as during national emergencies. Flexible learning ensures inclusive and accessible education. This means that learning programs are built based on students, school, or community capabilities. This model has three variations: online, offline, and blended platforms. Online mode is a flexible learning style that uses online classrooms. OERs are digital learning assets like webcasts, podcasts, videos, and audio. For those who want to learn without internet access, an offline mode is an option. Learners can use printed modules or digital resources like video and audio to learn. Further, blended learning combines online and offline learning. Classes are conducted using printed modules, videotapes, storage devices, and learning packages.

The new normal gave higher education institutions (HEIs) academic freedom to implement accessible ways of delivery to students [5]. A blended learning model is being used as a teaching method in Quirino State University, the Philippines, where the study was conducted. This applies both online and offline. Offline mode is utilized by students who live in remote areas without an internet connection. For students with dependable internet access, online instruction was implemented. As a result, the new normal education presented many new challenges to students [6].

Many studies have looked into the immediate impact of the Coronavirus outbreak on students. Some have been conducted to report the mental stress [7]–[9] and challenges experienced by students in virtual learning in their respective nations [10], in the Philippines [11], Pakistan [12], Nepal [13]. Meanwhile, Balachandran, Alagarsamy, and Mehroliya [14] reported many suicides due to stress from the new educational regimen. Suicides in Bicol have been linked to online learning barriers such as weak phone coverage, internet connection issues, and the high cost of data load. However, teachers are concerned that some students would be unable to comprehend independently [15]. Finally, Bozkurt and Sharma [3] examined how the COVID-19 outbreak impacted education globally.

To help authorities in crafting more effective solutions to education, this study will provide evidence about the difficulties faced by Filipino college students in a developing country like the Philippines. If this investigation is pursued, it will be possible to make conclusions, and, in the long run, it will open doors for suitable actions. Moreover, this paper also provides colleges and universities with a detailed overview of the situation regarding blended learning during suspension from the learners' perspective.

Thus, this paper sought to explore the lived experiences of university students using blended learning in the new normal. It specifically aims to explore and understand the difficulties of students and the coping mechanisms they employed. Further, the results of this investigation serve as a basis in coming up with an intervention program to address the difficulties experienced by college students during a pandemic.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This paper used a qualitative research design. Qualitative focuses on describing, analyzing, and interpreting phenomena rather than testing hypotheses [16]. This study also employs descriptive research. Further, to explain university students' blended learning difficulties during COVID-19, this design is appropriate. The study included 85 students purposely and conveniently chosen from the ten programs of Quirino State University in the Philippines for the academic year 2020-2021. Participants were selected based on their ability to provide data and internet connectivity during the conduct of the study. The study's online survey began with permission from the Campus Administrator, deans, and program chairs, informing them about the behavior of the study. Additionally, consent was obtained from the study's target subjects. The researchers explained that their involvement is optional. It was also emphasized that their responses would be examined, and their identities would remain anonymous if they participated.

The study used semi-structured open-ended questions to gather data on students' difficulties in blended learning. Further, the questionnaire's validity and reliability were checked by an expert whose credibility is beyond comparison. All questions in the questionnaire are open-ended, allowing respondents to elaborate as desired and the researchers to qualify and clarify their responses through phone call interviews. The survey had two sections. The first section asked for the demographic data of the participants. In the second section, students were asked about their difficulties and the coping strategies during blended learning in the new normal. The questionnaire was composed in English and then translated into "Iloko" (the native language of the students), allowing participants to express themselves freely. Further, participants were also asked to offer personal solutions/suggestions to the difficulties they experienced.

The survey data were collected from August 4 to August 10, 2021, using Google Forms. Electronic surveys are convenient ways to collect data. According to Regmi *et al.* [17], it may be built-in various web programs, conserves the energy required for lengthy surveys, and collects both quantitative and qualitative data. The number of participants was considered acceptable for the qualitative investigation since it allowed the present study to achieve its data saturation threshold [18]. Saturated data ensure replication in categories,

which verifies and ensures comprehension and completeness [19]. Furthermore, follow-up interviews with individuals whose responses were incomplete in the survey were conducted via phone/video call using the same semi-structured open-ended questions. They lasted one hour per participant from August 12-20, 2021. Hence, the follow-up interviews via video/audio call were done from the selected participants to gather more meaningful data.

Moreover, data were analyzed using inductive and thematic analysis to identify, evaluate, and determine the theme expressed by participants. Each participant's responses were coded using keywords to avoid overlapping responses, especially in the first stage. The NVivo application was used to help researchers with coding and categorization. Data from surveys and interviews were placed into Nodes and Cases to be categorized and coded. Thematic maps depict the arrangement of concepts at different levels, and possible interconnections involving concepts were established. The study's authors then reviewed all codes and categorizations and the possibilities of code integration to simplify the codes. This inductive technique enabled the discovery of themes given by the participants concerning research questions.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The main purpose of this study was to delve deeper into the difficulties faced by college students engaged in blended learning in the new normal in a state university. The first section summarizes students' difficulties in using blended learning in the new normal. The second part gathered participants' recommendations for addressing the difficulties.

3.1. Students' difficulties in using blended learning in the new normal

3.1.1. Vague module content

One of the most prevalent difficulties students enrolled in the new normal face is ambiguous module content. The students disclosed that they found it challenging to comprehend the lessons in their modules.

"The lessons are quite difficult, and I want to search on the internet. However, my cell phone is merely a keypad." (P8)

"I cannot afford to purchase a smartphone. As a result, I'm unable to access the internet. Furthermore, I do not respond to some activities in the module which I do not understand." (P28)

They also struggle with following the written instructions in the module:

"I cannot answer all of the exercises/activities due to confusing instructions." (P16)

Sadiq and Zamir [20] stated that the module is designed to assist teachers in transforming their classrooms into active, student-centered learning environments. This disproves the findings of the current study since students are impeded by confusing module content. They believe that this is because of the content rather than the delivery. While many university instructors have adopted online classes, the majority still use learning content created for on-campus instruction. For example, students receive printed modules with confusing directions. This could be related to teachers' unfamiliarity with offline and online teaching platforms [21], making it difficult for them to supply necessary supplemental resources [22].

3.1.2. Poor internet connection

This student's difficulty relates to their inability to access the internet due to poor signal/connectivity in their location, insufficient load, or having no smartphones at all. The second difficulty encountered by students participating in blended learning is inconsistent internet connectivity.

"If I need to conduct research, I won't be able to do so because there is no available signal in our area." (P9)

Hence, this issue is caused by geographical location most of the time, as stated:

"At the moment, we do not have internet access at home. Before COVID, I used to research internet cafes; however, I am no longer permitted to enter internet cafes." (P56)

According to the participants' statements, they are worried when they cannot access the internet to research a supplement in their modules. This caused tension and anxiety. This finding supports [14] claimed that online learning-related obstacles such as phone signal troubles, internet connection challenges, and data load costs were the most likely reasons for students' stress. Consistent with earlier studies [23], [24],

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the participants recognized unreliable internet availability as a major difficulty. Additionally, the inadequate network is a major concern for developing countries [24].

3.1.3. Lack of teacher's guidance and motivation

Participants in this survey stated that learning independently is difficult, since no one explains the module's content, or they can ask someone for clarification when doubts and confusions arise.

“It is difficult to understand the content of the module without proper knowledge and instructor's guidance.” (P19)

Further, they admitted that some of their subject instructors and professors were strict and inconsiderate:

“My instructor in major subject is very strict in terms of submission of answer sheets. For her, the deadline is the deadline.” (P78)

“Some words, especially scientific ones, are hard to grasp. Even looking it up in the dictionary doesn't help. I saw the value of instructors' role in discussing the lesson.” (P38)

Obtaining instructors' support is critical for students' learning. Teachers' expectations of learners can be difficult to meet at times. Teachers also help create a learning atmosphere challenging student. Participants' responses suggest that they had difficulties comprehending the module's contents and needed someone to explain the course content to them. Their responses indicate that their inability to understand frequently results from difficulty grasping the meaning of specific complex terminologies or phrases. They often achieve this by promoting student autonomy [25]. Similarly, students' learning ability can be improved if they are highly motivated [26]. The more meaningful guidance learners received from teachers, the higher their academic accomplishment. Moreover, the lack of instructor assistance was one of the factors related to poor academic achievement [27].

Language is one issue that significantly affects a student's life. Students who fail to understand academic language will eventually start thinking about it. Even when they have communicated effectively, they are dissatisfied and stressed. Many students become frustrated when they do not comprehend what their teachers are teaching. In like manner, they worry about failing a course because they barely understand the lecturers [28].

3.1.4. Financial problems

Furthermore, students have difficulties with flexible learning because of financial pressures. They added that while they have the option of working to fund their studies, they are unable to do so in light of the current economic climate.

“I don't have enough money to meet my educational needs such as loads and buying a laptop.” (P45)

Previous research has shown that students had financial problems throughout the pandemic. A recent comprehensive study in Malaysia [29] found that students are under financial stress. Also, financial constraints are the leading cause of our country's poor college graduation rate, ranging between 18 and 20% for the last decade [30]. Finally, Bernardo and Resurreccion [31] recognized financial demands as a source of stress for students in many higher education systems worldwide.

3.1.5. Stress and psychological pressure

One of the most significant difficulties mentioned by the participants was experiencing stress and psychological pressure. They verbalized that studying in these trying times caused them to overthink; as a result, they fail to focus and become unproductive.

“Due to pandemic, most of the time, my mind is pre-occupied that is why I cannot concentrate on answering my modules.” (P21)

Further, this study discovered that stress and psychological struggle among the participants are evident. This difficulty has three forms. The first is anxiety and tension. The student-participants showed frequent concern about internet blackouts and their inability to submit assignments or complete tests within the given deadline. Additionally, many students voiced concerns about online education, grades, tests, and deadlines:

“It’s challenging, I want to give up because I have a family to feed and at the same time accomplish my modules and attend my online class. I am worried I could not meet the deadlines.” (P76)

The second type of pressure is psychological. In general, this education emergency increases psychological stress, but each individual feels the impacts differently. The majority of students felt pressured as a result of the numerous study requirements and submission deadlines. Additionally, several students reported encountering an abundance of classwork they would not have faced under ordinary circumstances.

“I experience anxiety because of so many tasks required by our instructors.” (P10)

The third is future insecurity. Participants expressed concern about not completing field training or on-the-job training while quarantined, which would cause their graduation to be delayed.

“I’m depressed because I wasn’t able to finish my cases, which would undoubtedly postpone my graduation.” (P34)

The findings support a recent study [7] on how the COVID-19 epidemic impacted education globally. Students reported boredom, worry, and dissatisfaction. Further, Duraku and Hoxha [8] investigated the obstacles faced by students during the pandemic. During the isolation phase, students became terrified, anxious, frightened, and apprehensive. Also, concentrating on young people’s mental health during the pandemic, Cielo, Ulberg, and Giacomo [9] emphasized the significance of systematic and individualized psychological support and interventions to improve students’ quality of life.

3.1.6. Inadequate learning resources

Another issue that students mentioned is the unavailability of learning resources. The majority of students rely only on their phones, necessitating the use of additional resources.

“I find it challenging to browse the modules solely through mobile phones. It would be preferable if a laptop could be made available to see the soft copy on a large screen.” (P28)

“There is insufficient equipment for the online class, such as a laptop, printer, and other needs like art supplies, paper, and pen.” (P53)

Others are confronted with problems with the storage capacity of their gadgets:

“The capacity of my phone’s memory is not enough because of the applications stored like Zoom and Google Meet.” (P41)

Participants also reported difficulty obtaining critical learning resources, such as library books, which impacted their ability to complete assignments and projects. Another issue was the lack of digital devices. The participants admitted that they lack technological devices such as computers for browsing e-copy versions of their modules and android phones for online classes. This difficulty found in the present study is consistent with [32], who unveiled that the most significant obstacles affecting Pakistani students in this pandemic are inequity in access to technology and a lack of online learning materials.

Furthermore, the lack of electronic equipment in online learning was the most significant issue faced by tertiary students in Bangladesh [33]. For example, students’ access to remote learning devices such as computers has been a recurring concern as schools migrate to online remote learning in the face of a worldwide health emergency. Financial problems, which student participants also cited, may cause this issue. Currently, the present situation has intensified issues for those students who have trouble finding employment to meet their educational needs. Notably, in the Philippines, an unprecedented economic shutdown has exacerbated financial hardships for disadvantaged families [34].

3.1.7. Overloaded activities in the module

The students disclosed that they were having problems with blended learning because of overloaded activities in the modules. Several of them acknowledged having difficulty reaching their instructors’ deadlines and failing to complete all of the module’s lessons and activities.

“There are numerous activities. I only responded to a few of them to meet the deadline.” (P36)

Others confessed that soft copies of modules are added burden to them.

“One of our modules contains 200 pages that we must read on our mobile phones. I have to print it to complete all of the exercises.” (P23)

Academic overload is a word used to describe students' feelings of being overburdened by academic duties or responsibilities. Further, students expressed frustration with overwhelming activities. Due to the limited time given by their instructors, they could not complete all tasks in their modules. Additionally, reading soft versions of their modules on their mobile phones caused them to miss the deadline for completion. Others mentioned that they had to pay to print hard copies so they could fully answer all activities. These challenges caused them anxiety, which may have harmed their academic performance. This result conforms [35], who acknowledged that academic overload negatively affects university students' academic performance. A similar finding was found by [36] that academic workload was a significant source of stress for learners in Ghana. Finally, Calo, and Bustamante [6] confirm that academic overload is one of the considerable difficulties among students in the Philippines.

3.1.8. Conflict with household chores

This obstacle refers to the multiple chores that students must perform daily, which prevent them from concentrating on their modules and spending enough time on their studies. Students are responsible for cooking, cleaning the house, doing laundry and dishes, and babysitting younger siblings. These are apparent in the responses of the participants

“It's difficult to be a student right now. It can be challenging to balance my time when I'm studying and doing household. I alternate cleaning the house and answering my modules.” (P67)

“I have to divide my time between my modules and those of my younger brothers since I get reprimanded if their modules aren't completed. I also do the house chores, such as laundry and cleaning.” (P53)

Domestic responsibilities refer to the duties assigned to students at home, such as domestic chores. Due to family duties, the students said they couldn't focus on their modules. Parents may expect students to help with household chores if they stay home all day. The new normal in which the home doubles as a school have confounded students, as studying and doing household chores have become mixed up. These findings are underlined with previous study [28] results that having family responsibilities and working while in school is a substantial source of stress for most students. Moreover, students voiced out the challenge that remote learning schedules conflict with their home responsibilities. This disruption usually happens in remote learning because students need to do household chores [37].

3.1.9. Personal factors

This difficulty relates to students' behaviors or habits that impair their ability to concentrate on their modules and dedicate appropriate study time. These include lack of discipline, laziness, lack of confidence, and inability to learn. The student-participants admitted that they spent less time studying at home.

“I do not devote time to my modules. I simply respond to the activities that I am familiar with and never read all of the lessons.” (P49)

Others confessed that they are reluctant to seek help from others.

“Even if I do not completely comprehend the lesson, I do not seek assistance from my classmates or professors.” (P11)

Several of them revealed that they are simply negligent in their module work and that they cram when the deadline approaches.

“I'd rather do other things. I just cram when it is already deadline that is why my grade is very low.” (P7)

The students' responses show that their struggles to learn in this new normal are personal habits. This corroborates the concept of the study [38], who concluded that students under quarantine spend less time in learning. Similarly, Nguyen, Huptych, and Rienties [39] reported that high-achieving students spent

more time studying ahead of time. In comparison, low-achieving students spent more time catching up to various activities, improved planning by observing and maintaining a set daily routine, molding learner character and enhancing their motivation, enabling the setting of good examples, and positively contributing to better grades.

3.1.10. Poor and inconvenient learning environment

Furthermore, students reported trouble studying as a result of an unpleasant learning environment. Distractions from the environment, such as noise, make it difficult to concentrate while learning online. As described by the participants:

“Our surrounding is very noisy, that's why I cannot concentrate with my online class.” (P50)

“There is no comfortable place to study at home. I cannot focus with the studies well.” (P23)

Onyema *et al.* [40] noted that one of the obstacles from online learning during a pandemic is the learning environment where noises emerge internally or externally from the neighborhood. Further, Nambiar [41] showed that the students found it difficult to concentrate during online classes because of distractions at home. Additionally, they do not have a structured learning environment that makes it harder for the students to focus throughout the course. They also mentioned that staying at home makes online classes difficult for them because they cannot balance household and academic responsibilities. Some also claimed that a lack of a supportive home environment and family concerns made it difficult to engage in online classes fully. Consequently, a poor learning environment is detrimental for students to participate in remote learning comfortably. This difficulty has been repetitively revealed in students' responses.

Moreover, establishing a positive and conducive learning space has long been a problem in distance education, especially in most poor households [42]. If this problem develops, it jeopardizes student productivity and focuses [43]. The unexpected shift to remote learning amid a health crisis has obscured an unfavorable learning environment, affecting students' academic performance. Students also expressed concern about how remote learning schedules interfere with their household tasks. This disturbance is more prevalent in remote learning since students are required to assist with household tasks. This issue may affect university students' academic performance, as prior research has demonstrated that students' involvement in family tasks has a detrimental effect on their academic achievement [44]. Finally, conducive learning environment is essential to facilitate interaction and engagement among students [45].

4. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to explore the difficulties associated with blended learning for college students during the COVID-19 pandemic. There were 10 interesting themes emerged from the findings, namely: vague module content; poor internet connectivity; lack of teacher's guidance and motivation; financial problems; stress and psychological pressure; insufficient learning materials; overloaded academic activities; conflict with household chores; personal factors; and poor and inadequate learning environment. Furthermore, this finding contextualizes the numerous problems that students in a developing country like the Philippines face amid the current global crisis. It is proposed that these obstacles be viewed as inputs to the current educational process's progress. Specifically, government officials should advocate for advancements in technology and access to internet connectivity, particularly in isolated and remote places. This step should help reduce perceived digital gaps across different geographic areas and financial backgrounds. Additionally, school administrators should take the initiatives to improve all aspects of student support. A critical feature of blended learning that may not be concealed in the psychological part of learning, which teachers should address.

On the other hand, teachers should reconsider their instruction in terms of content and activities, as students raised concerns about these components. Additionally, an instructional evaluation may be conducted periodically to aid learners who are falling behind. Further, parents should also provide the necessary support to ensure that learners eventually endure this flexible education in times of crisis. This study recognizes its limitations, including the fact that it was conducted on a small sample. As a result, extensive surveys should be done in the future better to understand the difficulties of students at various levels. Finally, appropriate dissemination of the study's findings and presentation of the proposed intervention program to administration, deans, program chairs, and other faculty members for evaluation and implementation could be undertaken to address student's difficulties in the new normal.




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