A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experiences of Graduate Students Adapting Flexible Learning Modality Due to COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The Lived Experiences of Graduate Students Adapting Flexible Learning Modality due to COVID-19 Pandemic was examined in this study. It tackles how the graduate students can cope with the many challenges the new normal of our educational system could offer. Using a qualitative, phenomenological research framework, this study uses in-depth individual interviews to collect data. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and thematically analyzed. To further explore the perception of the participants in taking PhD class despite of flexible learning, there are four questions to get the reactions, like: The aspects of an online course that they are worried about or thought would be beneficial. Advantage and disadvantage of online course. Comparison of graduate students' experiences in flexible learning modality to normal classes. Experience with the online technologies that they utilized. With that questions as a guide, themes, sub themes and

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significant statement were identified. They think that flexible modality does not affect or hinder learning for their professional advancement and growth. They took advantage of the online class, not to travel to school anymore. Worry on the first meeting because they could not easily join the Google meet. Enjoyable but Brain draining. Compared to normal classes they said: Convenient because it lessens the fare for transportation, more time at home, can attend the class even without taking a bath, save expenses for food and fare. Inconvenient in the sense that they could not cope with the discussion because of poor internet connectivity. As to the delivery of knowledge, they are the same. The online technologies quantify their eagerness to learn new and advance technology Recommendations for online instructors to support students about the flexible learning modality. There should be provision for modules, videos and other links. Be lenient and understanding of the submission of requirements because of limited time and poor connectivity. Minimize the activities.

Keywords: Flexible learning modality; new normal COVID-19 pandemic; lived experiences.

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a massive shift from in-person learning activities to a sudden heavy reliance on internet-mediated education. For others, this shift will have been a considerable dislocation for both educators and learners in the provision of education [1]. The social impacts of pandemics were severe, include travel was strictly limited, and schools closing, markets and sporting were closed. All these are a likely reality should a pandemic with true potential for high morbidity and mortality emerge. School closure is often considered the first non-pharmaceutical intervention for implementation in a pandemic, as students are effective in spreading the virus [2]. Such move has reshaped the contour of education by shifting from face-to-face to *full* online learning. Although online learning is no longer a new norm of instruction in higher education, but previous reports reveal several challenges. These include but not limited to learners' readiness, lack of variation in pedagogy, and lack of empowerment in content development or merely teaching with predefined content [3]. Further, many universities and colleges are not equipped with infrastructure that facilitates online teaching, and students do not have access to computer hardware and internet services [4].

It has been observed that numerous State Universities, Central Universities, Colleges and by far institutes have modulated their practices during COVID-19 by positioning themselves on the technological approach embodying variety of e-platforms for unstopped delivery of lectures and learning activities [5]. In the Philippine setting, the country is unprepared for the advent of the implementation of emergency remote education. During this crisis, the country is still struggling to offer alternative delivery education since numerous schools in the Philippines were in a conventional classroom setting before COVID-19. The time though is inevitable as the educational system in the country has to face its biggest challenge to date, that of groping in an emergency remote education. This is especially highlighting the case of alternative delivery in the Philippine educational system in which the country is still grasping in its trials stage [6].

Recent work on co-creation of learning and teaching challenges these traditional norms and practices regarding the 'academic' and 'student' roles within higher education and advocates a greater democratization of the educational process. Co-creation of learning and teaching occurs when staff and students work collaboratively with one another to create components of curricula and/or pedagogical approaches [7]. Empowering students to select how, when, and where they learn in this time of pandemic, they can combine work and study and accomplish their learning tasks within the safety of their home. They may be not front liners but still, they are facing struggles for survival [8].

Offering flexible learning could be a great adjustment to graduate students, in terms of delivery and pacing. It will be unavoidable if the COVID-19 crisis is going to be around for a while, and defining flexible quality standards for it will be indispensable as well. There is no doubt that there are many challenges to implement and assure quality of online education. In addition to issues of access and Internet connectivity, not all programs can be supported by online technology, such as lab-based research programs, for example. And governments need to be aware of the inequalities that online learning can create as students from lower socio-economic strata find it more difficult to access to IT infrastructure and internet packages. There

should be a coordinated approach between governments, quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions that addresses not only available resources but also a broader vision of what flexibility of learning can provide.

However, Online learning can promote collaborative learning opportunities and connections to a diverse student population that may not be possible in a traditional learning environment. Furthermore, online courses are becoming increasingly more accepted due to the inherent flexibility of learning "anytime, anywhere". Online learning has the potential to increase higher education's student enrollment, while at the same time being an important moneymaking venture. One such promise was that online education could help higher education's limited budgets by avoiding additional costs, increasing access to more students, reducing current costs, improving cost-efficiencies, and offering massive program customization and flexibility [9]. Moreover, this pandemic will change the course of education as we know it. Theory based learning should give way to experiential learning, taking greater recourse to technology [10]. Since smartphones, laptops, and internet connections are the technical requirements for online education, it helps students to decide when to enter, or exit a course and encourage students to work individually and attend online classes [11].

While there is a great number of researches pertaining to the impact of the novel coronavirus in education [12], studies exploring how to enhance flexible learning and resolve emerging issues and challenges associated to it are currently limited [13]. In order to understand the Lived Experiences of Graduate Students Adapting Flexible Learning Modality, how the students can cope the many challenges the new normal of our educational system, this study was conducted.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

Qualitative phenomenology as the methodology employed in the current study. This study utilized a qualitative phenomenological research design. The phenomenological study attempts to understand people's experiences in a certain phenomenon. The purpose of this approach is to illuminate the specific, to identify phenomena through how they are perceived by the actors in a situation [14]. The goal of phenomenological research is to describe the "lived experiences" of a phenomenon. The purpose of the current qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of graduate students adapting flexible learning modality. Phenomenology focuses on the analysis of conscious and immediate lived experience and is sensitive to the uniqueness of each person [15]. Furthermore, to seek reality from individuals' narratives of their experiences and feelings, and to produce in-depth descriptions of the phenomenon [16]. The findings of the study can help higher institutional leaders improve online learning environments for Graduate Students.

2.2 Data Gathering

Through emails and phone calls, the experiences of graduate students adapting flexible learning methods due to the COVID-19 pandemic were collected. Researcher interview guided by the formulated unstructured interview guide questions that were then analyzed for inference and conclusion using thematic analysis. To obtain the background of the former, the profile and work experiences of the respondents were asked.

2.3 Respondents

The selection methods, participant recruitment, and sampling procedures are carried out according to the graduate students taking up PhD-EM and PhD-TM at Samar State University who are related to this study. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling method and occurs when elements selected for the sample are selected by the judgment of the sampleThis sampling technique is practical for the researcher to use because the criteria used for enclosure in the research are the ability of the participants to illuminate the research.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study explores the Lived Experiences of Graduate Students Adapting Flexible Learning Modality. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This phenomenon compelled the interest in exploring the graduate student perspective on Flexible Learning Modality due to the COVID-19 pandemic. To design the study, a qualitative framework was used. The data collection and analysis was guided by methods common to phenomenological research. The findings are a culmination of the perception of graduate

Chart 1. Profile of the respondents

		n
Program of Study and Major		
	PhD-TM	3
	PhD-EM	5
Year currently in		
	First year	3
	Second year	3
	Third Year	2
Gender		
	Male	2
	Female	6
Age		
	25-29	1
	30-39	2
	40-49	3
	50-52	2

students to share a deep perspective on their living experiences. The researcher set up the framework on the basis of the interview to study and answer the primary research question of how graduate students adapt flexible learning methods.

3.1 Pre-Interview Questionnaire

As part of this study, eight participants shared their experiences to gain deeper insights into the Graduate Student Living Experiences Adapting Flexible Learning Modality. In PhD-TM, three of the participants are enrolled and five are taking PhD-EM. Three graduate students are just getting started, three are in their 2nd year of studies, and two are already in their 3rd year. Three of the credit units earned by graduate students earned 9 units, two students earned 24 units, one student earned 27 units, and two students earned 54 units. All participants have disclosed that this is the first time they are currently enrolled in an experienced online course. The participants included two males and six females between the ages of 25 and 52. All the demographics of the data and participants are shown in Table 1.

3.2 Graduate Students Perception in Taking PhD Class Despite of Flexible Learning: Aspects of an Online Course that they are Worried about or Thought Would be Beneficial

PhD-TM students worry about the discussion aspect whenever there is an interactive class due to the unstable connection to the internet. Most of them are beginners in the use of communication based on the internet. In using

platforms such as zoom and google meetings, they do not have enough expertise. However, students acquire and develop skills in order to apply to the teaching and learning process due to the need to learn the said platforms.

3.3 Described Experiences in Taking Online Classes: Advantage and Disadvantage of Online Course

The benefit of taking online classes is that online education could help the limited budgets of higher education by avoiding additional costs because you don't have to travel to attend classes. The disadvantages are that there is a small chance to interact in the discussion due to the disruption of the internet connection. And also, because of so many requirements, some have found it difficult to manage time.

3.4 Comparison of Graduate Students Experiences in Flexible Learning Modality to Normal Classes

They are the same with regard to the delivery of knowledge. It helps to reduce the budget through online learning by avoiding additional costs such as transportation fare and food expenses. While the inconvenience of transport, especially the long journey from home to school, is in normal face-to-face classes.

3.5 Graduate Students Experience with the Online Technologies That They Utilized

In using all the gadgets and enjoying the new technology has to offer, graduate students gain fresh knowledge. For their jobs, their eagerness to learn new technologies is very helpful

Table 1. Pre-interview profile of participants

		n
Program of Study and Major		
	PhD-TM	3
	PhD-EM	5
What year are you currently in?		
	First year	3
	Second year	3
	Third Year	2
How many credits have you earned so far?		
	3-9	3
	12-24	2
	27-36	1
	39-48	2
How many online courses have you completed?		
	3 subjects/9 units	8
How many online courses are you currently enrolled?		
	3 subjects/9 units	8
Gender		
	Male	2
	Female	6
Age		
	25-29	1
	30-39	2
	40-49	3
	50-52	2

Table 2. Aspects of an online course that they are worried about or thought would be beneficial

Themes	Sub themes	Significant statement
Professional advancement/ growth	Geographical location	Flexible modality does not affect or hinder learning.
Finish doctoral degree		Worry about the aspect of discussion, if there is an interactive class happened because of unstable internet connection
Encourage by workmates		Don't know how to use zoom and Google meet
Developed skills in order to apply in teaching and learning process	Beneficial as a teacher	More necessary to Developed skills in order to apply in teaching and learning process
Taking advantage of online class		Taking advantage of online class, it is convenient for me, no need to travel to school.

Table 3. Described experiences in taking online classes. Advantage and disadvantage of online course

Themes	Sub themes	Significant statement
Embarrassing	Continue with our studies, weak connectivity	Due to disruption of internet connection worry on the first meeting because I could not easily join the Google meet.
Choppy Audio	Pressured to attend the class	Little chance to interact in the discussion
Know how to use, google meet, zoom and LMS		Save money for Transportation
Gain additional insight	Finding hard to manage time because of so many requirements	Gain additional insight and conduct online class at work.
		Enjoyable but Brain draining.
		Still pushing myself to focus on the bright side in order to be hone and greater than before

Table 4. Comparison of graduate students experiences in flexible learning modality to normal classes

Themes	Sub themes	Significant statement
Convenient	Benefits	Lessen the fare for transportation, more time at home
		Can attend the class even without taking a bath
		Save expenses for food and fare
Inconvenient	Drawbacks	Far from our place, the long ride from home.
		Could not cope with the discussion because of poor internet connectivity
		Need more patience, hassle, very tiring
The same as to delivery of knowledge		As to the delivery of knowledge, they are the same

Table 5. Graduate students experience with the online technologies that they utilized

Themes	Sub Themes	Significant statement
Advance technology		Weak internet connection
Not good experience		Not good because of unstable internet connection
Usage of all the gadgets		Know how to use, laptop, mobile phone and headset
Eagerness to learn new technology		Very useful to their jobs
Good internet connection		Fortunate to have Good internet connection in my place.

Table 6. Recommendations for online instructors to support students about the flexible learning modality

Themes	Sub themes	Significant statement
Provision for modules, videos and other links.		Aside from online classes there should be provision for modules, videos and other links
Minimal activities		Minimize the activities
Guide student to use the LMS		Before the class start, professor should give aid or guidance or inform all the possible LMS to be used
Synchronous and asynchronous method of teaching		I like ther strategy of Synchronous and asynchronous method of teaching
Be lenient and understanding on the submission of requirements		Be lenient and understanding of the submission of requirements because of limited time and poor connectivity and this modality is new to the student
Preparation on both on the lesson and the internet connectivity		

3.6 Recommendations for Online Instructors to Support Students about the Flexible Learning Modality

Some of the recommendations are to be lenient and to understand the submission of requirements because of limited time and poor connectivity, and the student is new to this modality. Apart from online classes, modules, videos and other links should be provided and activities should be minimized.

4. CONCLUSION

The overall objective of this qualitative, phenomenological study is to better understand the experiences of graduate students who adapt flexible learning methods through online courses to achieve at least a portion of their education. The biggest challenges discussed by participants are the adaptation and handling of flexible learning modalities by graduate students. The graduate students taking up PhD courses, although a challenge, believe that flexible modality does not affect or impede learning for their professional advancement and growth. Despite flexible learning, taking advantage of online classes, not traveling to school, skills developed to apply in the teaching and learning process in their workplace are more necessary. Due to internet connection disruption during and during student interaction, the graduate students described their experience of taking their online classes as embarrassing. Worry about the first meeting because you couldn't join the google meeting easily. Pleasant but brain draining, still pushing themselves to concentrate on the bright side in order to be honed and greater than before. In comparison, in flexible learning modality, graduate students experience normal classes: convenient because it reduces the transport fare, more time at home, can attend the class even without taking a bath, save food and fare expenses. Inconvenient in the sense that, because of poor internet connectivity, they could not cope with the discussion. It takes a lot of patience, hassle and a lot of exhaustion. They are the same with regard to the delivery of knowledge. The experience of graduate students with online technologies quantifies their eagerness to learn new technologies and advance the use of all gadgets in technology.

5. LIMITATIONS

As part of this study, only 8 participants shared their experiences and shared deeper insights.

One of the reasons for the limitation is due to the COVID-19 pandemic situation and the researcher also met a saturation point of the interview with this number. Also, For phenomenological studies, Creswell recommends 5 – 25 [17] and Morse suggests at least six [18]. These recommendations can help a researcher estimate how many participants they will need, but ultimately, the required number of participants should depend on when saturation is reached.

CONSENT

As per international standard or University standard, respondents' written consent has been collected and preserved by the authors. The researcher states that the participants in a research study read the data sheet and explained the study details to them using a language that is convenient (e.g. waray-waray). They fully understand that they have the right at any time to withdraw from the study and to refuse to answer any specific questions. It is agreed that the researcher's information or name will not be used without my permission. It is agreed that the interview will be recorded electronically. Participation in this study is accepted under the conditions set out in the information sheet.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

As per international standard or university standard written ethical approval has been collected and preserved by the authors.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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