

***Surveillance on College Students' Experiences During Online Modality:
Towards an Independent Learning Approach***

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Abstract

With the COVID-19 pandemic that resulted in lockdowns in the Philippines starting in March 2020, learning had to be immediately shifted to an online modality, a setup where students studied mostly on their own forcing them to become independent learners. Using descriptive phenomenology by Paul Colaizzi as a research design, the study investigated the lived experiences of college students under the online learning modality during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through in-depth interviews, data was gathered from (15) full-time third-year college students during the Second Semester of the Academic Year 2022-2023 at a Philippine higher education institution. Findings showed that participants mostly describe independent learning as “learning on your own” or “self-study”. As a result of learning alone during the pandemic, they were able to develop independent learning skills and capabilities such as flexibility and adaptation, self-reflection and continuous improvement, openness to new perspectives, resourcefulness and self-reliance, and setting goals and measuring progress. Results further revealed that students became resilient; they were able to adapt to the new learning setup and found ways to learn on their own to survive or thrive in the new learning setup despite the difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic. Recommendations included promoting independent learning through explicitly creating a policy and incorporating it into the curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and support service programs of the university, to fully realize the potential of students to become independent learners.

Keywords: Independent Learning, Lived Experiences, COVID-19 Pandemic, Online Modality

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has radically changed the educational landscape. The Philippines faced a critical situation due to the said health crisis. For higher education institutions, avoiding and limiting the risks of infection in the academic community has become a primordial concern. Hence, with the implementation of community quarantine, the conduct of classes needed to be immediately suspended. The herculean challenge then was how to continue teaching and learning beyond the usual face-to-face instruction.

Even before the pandemic, several higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Philippines had already started using the blended learning modality which is a combination of face-to-face and online learning through a Learning Management System (LMS). Most universities had to immediately shift to full online learning when lockdown was declared in March 2020 (2nd Semester, Academic Year 2019-2020).

Whether flexible learning was done online or using printed modules, the reality that confronted students was that they had to become independent learners – they had to go through their modules independently, now the teacher becoming a facilitator rather than the transmitter of knowledge.

A literature review done by the researcher revealed that there have been many studies conducted about independent learning but most of them were done in Western countries and very few in the Philippine setting. This may be attributed to online learning being something new in the Philippines. In addition, no study yet has been conducted on independent learning in the Philippines at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. With online learning as the new norm, independent learning must be a primary competency of students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to explore the experiences of college students on independent learning under the online learning modality during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the study intended to answer the following: 1) How do the participants describe independent learning? 2) What are the lived experiences of college students on independent learning in the online modality? 3) What program and strategies can the university adapt to develop independent learning among students?

The study focused on the experiences of students with independent learning through online modality during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was conducted in the Lyceum of the Philippines University Manila among fifteen (15) full-time third year level students. Three (3) participants were chosen from each of the following colleges: College of Arts and Sciences, College of Business Administration, College of International Relations, College of International Tourism and Hospitality Management, and College of Technology. Third year students were chosen because they experienced the first year of fully online learning in LPU Manila that was implemented effective AY 2020-2021. Nine (9) female students and six (6) male students participated in the research.

Methodology

The study utilized qualitative research design, particularly, descriptive phenomenology using an in-depth interview instrument to gather data from the participants. Colaizzi's approach to descriptive phenomenological analysis was used.

Ethical practices were exercised, and a data management plan was in place to ensure that data privacy was preserved. The research protocol was submitted to the Philippine Social Science Council-Social Science Ethics Review Board (PSSC-SSERB) for review and approval. The study was conducted only after approval of the said body.

Conclusion

Findings

The participants mostly describe independent learning as “learning on your own”, “self-study”, “learning to come from your own initiative”, “having your own learning time or learning pace”, “learning with little or no guidance” or “without the help of professors or teachers”. These are consistent with earlier definitions of independent learning as gathered by the researcher.

Aside from self-organization, there is also a component of independent learning where the teacher does not play a central role in the learning process (Scheel et al., 2022). According to Moore (1973), independent learning and teaching constitute an educational approach where the learner operates autonomously, separated from the teacher by space and time, with communication occurring through print, electronic, or other non-human mediums (p. 663). This learning approach requires students to be active and independent in their learning. It focuses on student-centered learning, where students are encouraged to seek new knowledge on their own without being guided by others. This ability to learn independently is known as self-directed learning.

Based on the results of the study, students during the pandemic were forced to learn on their own. Thus, we can conclude that the online learning environment may have served as the driver for the development of independent learning skills among students. This also suggests that students became resilient; they were able to adapt to the new learning setup and found ways to learn on their own to survive or thrive in the new learning setup despite the difficulties brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Five themes emerged as a result of the study - flexibility and adaptation, self-reflection and continuous improvement, openness to new perspectives, resourcefulness and self-reliance, and setting goals and measuring progress.

1. Flexibility and Adaptation

Students often face changing circumstances, such as shifting from traditional classroom settings to online or self-paced learning. Independent learners demonstrate flexibility by adjusting their study routines, adopting new technologies or platforms, and embracing alternative methods of learning. They adapt their strategies and approaches to accommodate different learning environments and make the most out of the available resources.

Participant A stated that:

"...We were mostly doing modules asynchronously, so basically the professors would explain to us that we need to study the modules on our own given that the synchronous classes are very limited."

Participant B stated that:

"it was online and we had to adapt to the new way of learning. So, we did not have any choice. If we will not adapt, we will be left behind."

In independent learning, there is a shift in power dynamics between the teacher and the learner, favoring the learner (Chene, 1983). Additionally, the student must independently strive to solve problems (Abrosimova, 2020), and the ability to learn without direct teacher support is crucial for academic success, particularly in digital learning environments (Scheel et al., 2022). Digital learning necessitates a higher level of motivation and persistence, as learners must take greater responsibility for their learning process compared to face-to-face learning with direct instructions from a teacher (Yunusa & Umar, 2021).

2. *Self-reflection and Continuous Improvement*

Independent learners engage in self-reflection to assess their progress, identify areas for improvement, and make necessary adjustments to their learning strategies. They actively seek feedback, evaluate their strengths and weaknesses, and use this self-awareness to refine their study habits and approaches. They are committed to continuous improvement and strive to enhance their learning experience by reflecting on their achievements and areas for growth.

Participant I mentioned that:

"one [learning] strategy that I learned from a friend is the Microsoft To Do List. I downloaded this to-do list, an app where I could input my schedules and deadlines and it will remind me. Another strategy that I found effective is comparing notes and ideas with friends or classmates."

Participant J also utilized the Microsoft To Do List by stating that:

"[the feature was] effective for me because during the pandemic it was very hard to go to bookstores to get highlighters and post-its materials."

Self-reflection has been a key aspect of this process. As students engage in independent learning, they must assess their strengths, weaknesses, and areas for growth. By reflecting on their progress and learning experiences, they can identify what strategies work best for them and what needs improvement.

Participant G stated that:

"I realized that I am privileged in the sense that I had a lot of time to study during the online setup. So, I was able to set goals like I made sure to recite every meeting, participate in class activities, and pass academic requirements on time."

Participant H mentioned that:

"I became keener on learning. I like learning something new. So, every time I encounter something, I become curious, so I try to verify or read about it some more."

Relatedly, Participant K suggested that:

"I am getting better at balancing everything out, like with time management and the quality of my work."

Participant A also stated that:

"The basic skills needed for learning on your own are time management and self-discipline. These are the key factors for independent learning."

Continuous improvement is also vital during this time. As the pandemic pushed students to learn independently, they had the chance to refine their study habits, time management skills, and approaches to learning new concepts. By consistently seeking ways to enhance their learning process, they can adapt and thrive in this new educational landscape. Furthermore, independent learning has brought about the importance of resilience and adaptability in the face of uncertainty. Independent learning has allowed the students to develop a growth mindset, enabling them to embrace challenges and view setbacks as opportunities for learning and improvement.

3. Openness to New Perspectives

Independent learners embrace diverse viewpoints and perspectives, recognizing the value of learning from others. They actively engage with different sources of knowledge, collaborate with peers, participate in online forums, or seek mentorship to broaden their understanding and gain new insights. They remain open-minded and receptive to alternative viewpoints, promoting intellectual growth and expanding their horizons.

Participant L shared a similar sentiment by stating that:

"the pandemic has taught us many things, not only about lessons learned in the classroom but outside LPU as well."

This coincides with a study conducted by Zhu et al. (2022). The focus of the research was on investigating the behavioral intentions of 193 university students regarding online learning before, during, and after the COVID-19 lockdown. The findings revealed a significant increase in students' inclination to engage in online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, therefore increasing their academic performance.

Participant G stated that:

"Sometimes I ask my siblings when it comes to some topics that I cannot understand, or I ask them to check my grammar."

Participant F stated that:

“My interactions with my classmates also contributed to a deeper understanding of our lessons because we share our thoughts with each other.”

4. Resourcefulness and Self-reliance

Independent learners develop resourcefulness and self-reliance as they navigate their learning journey. They take the initiative in seeking out learning resources, such as online materials, books, and research papers, to supplement their knowledge. They leverage their problem-solving skills and creativity to find solutions to challenges they encounter along the way. They become self-reliant by taking ownership of their learning process and actively seeking opportunities for self-guided exploration.

Participant C stated that:

“I also learned to rely on my own and explore on my own as we could not rely 100% on our teachers. I also realized that I needed to exert extra effort. Those extra efforts paid off as my grades went higher.”

Participant F stated that:

“I usually used the desktop for my online classes, and I have another device, my cellphone, to take down notes or take pictures of the lecture slides.”

Participant F stated that:

“What I did during the online modality was to open my Mrooms, read and try to understand what I was reading and listed down keywords so I can easily recall them, and the concepts associated with these keywords.”

Participant H stated that:

“In my field, computer science, not all learnings are taught in the classroom, so you have to be resourceful enough. What I do is take free online courses.”

Participant G stated that:

“I think the initiative to learn on my own happened because communication was difficult during the pandemic. So, what I did was do further research on the topics or lessons.”

5. Setting Goals and Measuring Progress

Research by Locke and Latham (2002) emphasizes the significance of setting short-term goals as they provide immediate direction, focus, and motivation. Short-term goals act as building blocks towards long-term objectives, facilitating progress and boosting self-efficacy. Additionally, studies suggest that individuals who regularly set and achieve short-term goals experience increased productivity, satisfaction, and overall well-being (Grant & Dweck, 2003; Oettingen, 2012).

As reiterated by Participant K:

"I think when I look at the deadline given by my professor, I would say my goal is to accomplish this a day before..."

Gollwitzer's research on implementation intentions highlights the power of linking specific actions to goal attainment (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006). By forming if-then plans, students may enhance their commitment to goal pursuit and overcome potential obstacles. Implementation intentions promote proactive behavior, increase self-control, and improve the likelihood of successful goal achievement.

Participant D admitted that their *"goal is to be productive every day, so I make sure to finish today what needs to be done today or to be submitted tomorrow."*

Likewise, Participant F stated that:

"I set a goal that every day, I accomplish or finish something, like one activity so my things to do will not pile up. And if there is free time, I do self-reading. I also allot time for rest and prepare myself for the next set of requirements or readings."

While short-term goal setting is widely regarded as a beneficial practice, it is essential to explore the potential negatives associated with this approach. Setting overly ambitious or unrealistic short-term goals can lead to increased stress, pressure, and burnout (Locke & Latham, 2002). When individuals continuously strive for immediate results and push themselves relentlessly, they may experience physical and mental exhaustion, decreased motivation, and decreased well-being.

This may also be realized in the statements by Participant L by sharing that:

"I set a high standard and I always do SWOT analyses of problems, concerns, and projects. This is my way of knowing whether a certain project or activity that I need to undertake is feasible and what things I need to prepare. There were realizations that there are still things that I do not know or things that I needed to learn."

Participant E stated that:

"I set goals in the long term and always take into consideration how it will benefit more people, not just for me, but for the community."

Perfectionism, characterized by setting excessively high standards and a tendency to self-criticize, is often associated with unrealistic expectations (Hewitt & Flett, 2004). Research suggests that perfectionistic tendencies can contribute to burnout, as individuals may engage in relentless striving for flawlessness and experience distress when unable to meet their self-imposed standards (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Perfectionism can intensify the negative effects of unrealistic expectations on well-being and increase the risk of burnout.

Participant A shared that:

“I realized that when it comes to learning goals, I set them high. I think I am a perfectionist. I would like to have a high position in a hotel later so I strive to perform well in my academics and graduate with Latin honors.”

Similarly, Participant H whose way of setting goals *“is that I aim for the best results. I am a bit of a perfectionist. I do not stop until I am satisfied with the results. I am bothered if I am not satisfied with the results.”*

This may coincide with research that have shown a strong association between perfectionism and the presence of unrealistic expectations (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Perfectionistic individuals tend to set impossibly high standards for themselves and others, leading to unrealistic expectations of achievement and performance. Unrealistic expectations often stem from the fear of failure, the need for external validation, and a desire to meet unattainable ideals.

“I set high goals when it comes to my grades and when it comes to my academic work. For example, I set high expectations for papers or reports. Let us say, something is difficult to produce, like posters or infographics. I go through them a lot of times and I ask other people to critique my work,”

as stated by Participant E.

Monitoring progress is essential for goal attainment. Research suggests that regularly tracking and reviewing progress toward short-term goals enhances self-awareness, motivation, and self-regulation (Carver & Scheier, 1990; Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004). Additionally, receiving feedback, whether self-generated or from others, helps individuals assess their performance, adjust strategies, and stay on track (Locke & Latham, 2006).

Such were the responses by Participant B, who stated that *“I monitor my grades on quizzes, and I ask my teachers during consultation regarding the results of the assessment, especially areas where I did not do well or areas for improvement.”*

Research suggests that monitoring progress enhances goal achievement by increasing self-awareness and providing a sense of control (Carver & Scheier, 1990). Regularly tracking progress allows individuals to assess their performance, identify areas for improvement, and make necessary adjustments. It also helps individuals stay motivated and maintain focus on their goals (Wulfert, 2018).

As observed from most of the responses of the students, they are able to set short-term goals like getting good grades, being able to comply with the requirements of the course/subject, or being able to meet deadlines given by their teachers.

There are also goals that pertain to achieving high academic standards like setting high expectations for academic outputs, getting good grades or to be in the dean’s list, aiming for best results, or to be among the best students in class. However, some of these need to be SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time-bound) so that the desired outcomes of a goal will be achieved.

Implications to Pedagogy

To fully realize the potential of students to become independent learners, the researcher recommends that the university to actively promote and support independent learning through a directed independent learning (DIL) approach wherein independent learning is explicit as a policy goal and incorporated into the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment as suggested by an in-depth study by Thomas, Jones and Ottaway (2015) on effective practice in the design of directed independent learning opportunities conducted in the United Kingdom as commissioned by the Higher Education Academic (HEA) and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). The learning environment should also support independent learning through the provision of appropriate learning materials such as books, online learning materials and physical learning spaces in the library and in the university. Academic support and non-academic staff should also be actively involved in engaging, enabling, and facilitating students to be able to avail of the opportunities or services of the university in support of their learning or create co-curricular and extra-curricular programs that foster independent learning. This will ensure that the benefits of independent learning will be fully realized by the students.

A whole-school approach or integrated approach to independent learning can have the following components:

- (1) A clear policy direction on independent learning that can be reflected in the vision and mission of the university. This will include a thorough orientation program for students and parents for them to appreciate the intent and purpose of the independent learning policy.
- (2) Inclusion of independent learning as a program outcome and a graduate attribute
- (3) Integration of independent learning into the teaching and learning approaches, including assessments, such that they are geared towards achieving independent learning.
- (4) Developing independent learning through student support services such as co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, leadership and welfare, and development programs.
- (5) Integration of a course on independent learning designed to develop or reinforce soft skills of students such as goal setting, time management, and self-discipline, which are some of the challenges experienced by the respondents during online and independent learning.

Limitations of the Study

The study focuses exclusively on the experiences of selected college students on independent learning through online modality during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research locale was limited to the Lyceum of the Philippines University Manila. The study was also limited to full-time second-year college students of the Lyceum of the Philippines University Manila who were enrolled for the Academic Year 2021-2022.

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