

Understanding the Lived Experiences Towards Online Learning During the Pandemic

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The Asian Conference on Education & International Development 2022
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Since the COVID-19 outbreak has come leading the face-to-face classes to be suspended, online learning has started to become a learning modality for students to pursue their education. The study aims to understand the lived experiences of students and teachers from private and public schools in Metro Manila. Students were able to adjust their schedules, study lessons at their own pace, and perform tasks online with the help of the internet. Aside from it, they no longer needed to come to school to take assessments and submit requirements to the teacher in a face-to-face setting. However, the common challenge they had encountered consisted of internet connection problems. With the help of online learning, students were able to be more independent, flexible focused, and organized. They were also able to spend more time with their families and at home since online learning could be done anywhere if they have gadgets needed. Moreover, they were able to learn more technological skills via various online platforms and applications. After the pandemic, hybrid learning can be implemented instead of purely online learning to mold the perspectives of students in learning modalities.

Keywords: Online Learning, Internet Connection, New Normal, COVID-19 Pandemic

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Introduction

This study deals with the lived experiences of learners residing in online learning. Online learning is done through the Internet and its materials such as social media, blogs, and educational platforms. Because of the outbreak of COVID-19, students can no longer be able to report to schools to have classes, which leads the schools to shift from face-to-face to online mode of delivery. Besides, people were suggested to follow the protocols regarding social distancing as said by Uscer-Pines, et. al. (2018). Schools were also advised to be closed to prevent the spread of COVID-19, and because of that, online classes were given more opportunities to be implemented (Basilaia & Kvavdze, 2020). It was assured that students would continue learning lessons along with their teachers despite the suspension of face-to-face classes. However, they would be into online classes in terms of schooling (Zhang, Wang, Y., Yang & Wang, C., 2020). Dhawan (2020) had seen that online classes had served as the new norms in education due to the outbreak of COVID-19 (Dhawan, 2020). This also served as an alternative to traditional learning, which used to be done in classrooms physically (Toquerio, 2020).

This study aims to identify the lived experiences in online learning. The researcher also aims to investigate how learners manage their schooling life in online learning. Further, it purports to answer these questions:

- i.) What are the benefits encountered in online learning during the pandemic?
- ii.) What are the challenges encountered in online learning during the pandemic?
- iii.) What are the learning opportunities encountered in online learning during the pandemic?

Benefits of Online Learning Together With its Learning Opportunities

Online learning has enabled the students to interact with the teachers during synchronous and asynchronous sessions at their respective places and time. They had also implied that online learning could promote convenience for the learners in terms of setting and time. Learners could learn their lessons at their own pace and would not need to go to school at a fixed schedule because of online learning. They had also added that they could also access online learning anywhere (Dong, Cao & Li, 2020). There were instances when learners who were not allowed to finish their studies on time due to their various problems such as finances and family could be able to finish their schooling. They also emphasized that age and learning capacity were disregarded in terms of being able to enroll in online schooling (Simamora, 2020). Students and teachers had found out that there were no restrictions in terms of schedule and could still use the online learning materials regardless of the duration of time consumed. Moreover, students and teachers no longer need to encounter external issues (i.e. traffic) commonly experienced in face-to-face settings (Gilbert, 2015).

Aside from these, online learning could help the students to enhance their motivation and self-confidence toward learning. It was mentioned that students and teachers could even use learning materials they are in the online modality of learning. They had specified that the learning materials could be found on the Internet and considered digital platforms such as videos and music files as one of the materials in online learning. It was also observed that students could learn through various strategies, like chatting, watching videos, and reading online with the help of digital learning materials, which are parts of the information and communication technology (Bailey & Lee, 2020).

In terms of communicating with people, many learners and teachers had started to use various online platforms, like Zoom, Skype, and Google Meet, during meetings, conferences, and discussions. Besides, they no longer needed to submit requirements and documents physically because they could access collaboration platforms such as Microsoft Teams and Google Drive. Instead of placing papers at the desk, they could upload files to the respective drives. Students can also receive feedback through online messages and chats from their teachers (Byrnes, et. al. 2020).

Self-regulation and motivation were key concepts in attaining achievements in online learning. The self-regulating skills of students focused on independence towards learning lessons, completing tasks, and providing self-feedback. Besides, these also enabled the students on relying on themselves in studying lessons. She also added that intrinsic motivation was needed to develop the self-regulating skills of the students since self-regulation could not be alone in helping the students in achieving the goals needed in online learning. Hence, she mentioned that self-regulation and motivation, which could be done intrinsically, were both needed by students and teachers in online learning. This modality could enable the students to develop their self-regulation and motivation (Matuga, 2009)

Problems Encountered in Online Learning

In terms of technological barriers, difficulties in logging in to learning sites and learning platforms and downloading files needed for the tasks were one of the common issues students had encountered when accessing online platforms (Dhawan, 2020). Aside from these, some students had suffered an insufficient number of gadgets needed for online learning, internet accessibility issues, and a lack of technological literacy skills during online learning. According to one of the respondents in their findings, mobile data, a substitute for the internet, was being used in online learning because they had found out the internet was costly. There were complaints that the internet connection was weak in some of the areas where students are residing and there were episodes that the online platform, they were using crashed (Baticulon, et. al., 2020).

Aside from technological barriers, students also faced domestic problems regarding online learning. Some students were required by their parents to perform various household chores such as cleaning the house, assisting them in cooking dishes, and taking care of the younger members of their family. From the responses of the participants of the study done, these had occupied their schedules with online learning (Henaku, 2020). Working in non-conducive areas was also considered by the learners and teachers as one of the problems in online learning. Apart from it, budgeting was also emphasized as an issue because the usage of mobile data or the internet could affect their budget. One of the respondents had mentioned that they had to sacrifice their budget so they could be able to subscribe to an internet service provider for the sake of their needs in online learning (Baticulon, et. al., 2020). Since some students had budget issues, they were unable to buy any gadgets which can be used in online learning and pay internet fees. The findings regarding financial issues in the study done by Strong internet connection was needed for the usage of online resources such as video lectures and electronic books, however, to attain that, people had to spend their budget (Abuhammad, 2020).

Some students had experienced difficulties in understanding online lectures due to their duration and immense coverage of lessons. Since the duration of studying the lessons was long, some students had expressed that they had no time anymore in spending time with their

families and friends. Aside from having difficulties in studying lessons online, they also had issues adapting their learning styles to this modality. They had also mentioned that within this kind of modality, they no longer had social interactions with the teachers and peers, where they thought that they could collaborate (Khalil, et. al., 2020). Waiting for the messages from the teachers through chatting platforms (i.e. Facebook Messenger) and electronic mailing platforms (i.e. Gmail) could consume more time for the learners and they were only allowed to communicate with their teachers through these platforms during the learning periods. They also discussed that self-learning was hard to achieve and some students had faced mental health issues, particularly stress, and physical health issues, particularly headaches and eye strains. Aside from these issues, they even emphasized unpreparedness towards shift as one of the major concerns in online learning. They also found out that there were various gaps between teachers and students in terms of communication. They had seen to it that there were inconsistencies in giving feedback and assessments to the students (Abuhammad, 2020; Baticulon, et. al., 2020).

Methods

The researcher used a phenomenological existential research design to understand each of the lived experiences encountered by selected teachers and learners in the online learning during the pandemic. The participants contained students and teachers who had already experienced online learning during the COVID-19 outbreak. The number of participants in this study was 10 students and 4 teachers. The participants who came from the major cities in Metro Manila were chosen through the purposive-convenience sampling technique. The number of participants was limited due to accessibility issues. The data gathering was done through an online interview via Messenger instead of having a face-to-face interview for convenience purposes.

The tool to be used for the study consisted of questionnaires tackling the lived experiences of 21st-century learners in online learning and Facebook Messenger. The questions focused on benefits, challenges, and learning opportunities. The researcher asked permission from each participant if they could be able to answer interview questions by sending a message using Facebook Messenger. Each participant would be provided an interview questionnaire before answering each question during the interview process.

During the interview phase, each student was asked to share his/her experience in online learning. He/she was encouraged to tell the benefits and challenges of online learning and give suggestions on how to improve this system of learning. The researcher allowed the students to express their thoughts freely on their answers. The researcher encoded the answers of the participants who had answered his questions through private messaging. He also listened to the experiences of each student in online learning and understood how he/she had felt in online learning. He used thematic analysis in interpreting the answers of the participants about their lived experiences in online learning and deriving themes from each of them.

Findings

Benefits Experienced in Online Learning

According to the responses done by the 10 student participants and 4 teacher participants, the benefits of online learning consisted of the four derived themes:

The benefit of Online Learning	Participant(s)
Technological Skills and Exposure	SP2, SP4, SP9, TP1, TP2, TP4
Convenience	SP3, SP6, SP8, TP4
Time Management	SP4, SP5, SP7, SP8, SP10, TP2, TP3
Interpersonal Skills	SP1, SP3, SP4, SP7, TP3, TP4

Table 1. Benefits Experienced in Online Learning

Based on this table, three of the students and three of the teachers had cited technological skills and exposure as the benefit experienced in this modality. Here are some of their responses:

“The benefit that I had experienced in online learning was that I become more techie when it comes to doing any academic programs online.” (SP2)

“One of the benefits that I have experienced in online teaching is the ease of checking assessments due to the automation of quizzes in our school’s LMS, Canvas. Another is the more efficient updating of the Gradebook through the Canvas feature.” (TP2)

These participants had mentioned that they were able to learn more skills in technology, experience various online platforms, and become more techie. They had seen to it that they were more exposed to online learning platforms and technology due to the rise of this modality.

Three students and one teacher had indicated convenience as a benefit of online learning. One of the respondents had said:

“I can say it’s low cost in terms of not spending money on transportation and the food, unlike face to face we are required to spend money for those two.”

Based on their responses, the participants had indicated that they no longer need to ride various transportations for them to attend classes since their modality became online. Besides they also mentioned that they could be able to save more money since they did not need to buy food and pay for transportation. One of them had indicated that safety is their priority.

Five of the student participants and two teacher participants had indicated time management as a benefit of online learning. Here are some of their responses:

“The flexibility of schedule, for example, you have this assignment that is due this time well you can now make it whenever you’re free, you can make your schoolwork based on the time you’re comfortable with or most convenient for you same with same-paced learning, you can study whenever or wherever you want.”

Based on their responses, the teachers and students were able to manage their time in terms of their activities. The students had indicated that online learning is self-paced, which made them finish their tasks and study lessons at their own pace, as also said by the teacher participants.

Four students and two teachers indicated interpersonal skills as a benefit of online learning. One of the respondents had said:

“The benefits I experienced in online learning are, first I was able to maximize my time where I do not need to give additional time for travel, second is I can be able to look at my children and monitor them because I am in the house, and last is I have improvements in terms of technical issues.”

They had said that this modality had enabled them to spend more time with their family, which developed their love for family. Aside from this, they were able to improve their technological literacy and their time management skills. One of the respondents had indicated that this modality could be able to enhance one's professional growth, which could develop interpersonal skills. Based on personal development, this also enabled them to develop their responsibility skills.

Challenges Encountered in Online Learning

According to the responses done by the 10 student participants and 4 teacher participants, the benefits of online learning consisted of the four derived themes:

Challenge of Online Learning	Participant(s)
Health Issues	SP1, SP4, SP8
Learning Environment Issues	SP2, SP5, SP7, SP8, SP10, TP1, TP2, TP3
Technological Issues	SP3, SP4, SP5, SP6, SP8, SP9, TP1, TP2, TP4

Table 2. Challenges Encountered in Online Learning

Based on this table, two students had encountered health issues as their challenges in online learning. Student Participants 1 and 4 had cited that mental health served as their challenge but they coped with it through taking care of themselves, while Student Participant 2 had encountered stress, exhaustion, and mental breakdowns but she coped it through spending quality time with friends and watching movies.

Five students and three teachers had indicated learning environment issues as their challenges encountered. Their issues about it consist of the following: noisy environments, adaptability issues, and difficulties in performing tasks as students and handling students as teachers. Here are some of their responses:

“For the noisy environment, I try to study or to attend class in the place where there is still noise also but very minimal or if I can't do that, I closed all the windows and doors just to minimize the voice, we can't pleas our neighbors to lower their voices or music.” (SP8)

“It is harder to focus during class since the setting is our home. There is a higher possibility of cramming since people feel lazier when they are at home.” (SP10)

“Also, the attitude of the students, most of them are lazy and can not follow the schedule for the activities and performance task, as a teacher, I still give them a chance to submit their works, nonetheless, I do not have grades to give for them” (TP1)

“I am challenged by the students' attendance count during synchronous classes. The students' lack of resources and time, especially in their not so comfortable environment at home.” (TP3)

Based on the responses, students had encountered difficult tasks and experienced noisy environments which prohibited them from focusing on their studies. Aside from it, they also had a hard time adjusting to the new environment of learning since they would be staying at home attending online classes. While for teachers, teachers had hard times checking the attendance of the students and imposing deadlines for the requirements, however, they had coped by considering them.

Six students and three teachers had indicated internet connection as their main challenge encountered. It was implied that internet connection was a common challenge for the students. One of them had mentioned:

“The challenges that I’ve faced during online class are mostly about internet connections, sometimes I cannot attend the class because of how slow the internet is.”

For students, they had to purchase mobile data to access the Internet since some could not afford Wi-Fi. Since teachers were able to afford to have Wi-Fi, they had chosen to communicate with them via platforms that could consume less mobile data.

Learning Opportunities in Online Learning

According to the responses done by the 10 student participants and 4 teacher participants, the benefits of online learning consisted of the four derived themes:

Learning Opportunities in Online Learning	Participant(s)
Personality Development	SP1, SP3, SP5, SP7
Technological Literacy	SP2, SP4, SP8, SP9, TP2
Flexibility	SP4, SP6, SP10, TP1, TP3, TP4

Table 3. Learning Opportunities in Online Learning

Based on the table below, four students had indicated personality development as their learning opportunity received in online learning. Here are some of their responses:

“Online Learning provides self-learning. Doing things on my own without physical interaction with my classmates creates a realization to me that the only person that helps me improve is myself.”

“Based on my experience, online learning provides unknown skills to students. It will help them to know what their hidden skills and talents are. As for me, it developed my multitasking skills, and it helps me to be patient and think outside the box.” (SP5)

They had mentioned that online learning had enabled them to become independent and self-reliant in terms of tasks and decision-making. Aside from it, it also allowed them to explore their abilities and talents and developed their multitasking skills. They had also realized that it also helped them to have critical thinking skills.

Four students and one teacher emphasized technological literacy as the learning opportunity they had gained in this modality. Here are some of their responses:

“Interactive quizzes and games (like Kahoot!) and watching videos” (SP8)

“Online learning equips the students to be skilled and updated with the present technological changes and trends.” (TP2)

They had experiences taking quizzes and tests online instead of answering each question in a test through paper and pen means. This modality had also enabled them to study lessons using various digital materials such as videos and e-books. They had believed that this modality had enabled them to be aware of the issues and developments of every technology, especially the Internet. With this modality, they were able to be more equipped in terms of technological skills.

From the responses done by three teachers and three students citing flexibility as a learning opportunity achieved in online learning during the pandemic, here are some of the responses:

“Because of the pandemic, it is has shown that learning can continue through distance education.” (SP4)

“It provides more time for those who have trouble in fixing their schedule.” (SP10)

“It opens the mindset of everyone that education can be done anytime at any possible ways.” (TP1)

They had believed that online learning would continue even if the pandemic were done since people were keen on the new normal together with its changes. With online learning, they also had understood that any learner regardless of age and background can continue their education. In terms of dealing with schedules, they also emphasized that teachers and students could adjust more since online learning allows them to work at their own pace. Aside from it, this modality had opened their horizons in learning.

Discussion

Online learning had become a trend in the educational systems in all countries, including the Philippines. Due to the suspension of the face-to-face classes, the Department of Education had decided to implement online modalities for the students to be able to continue their education despite the outbreak of COVID-19. However, students found it difficult since the way of interacting with their teachers and classmates is completely different from face-to-face. Despite the current issues, there are many benefits to online learning. Students and teachers were able to make use of the internet along with its apps such as Google and Zoom. In terms of technical skills, it was evident that the participants were able to increase their technological literacy such as editing photos and videos, and even, get more used to using various gadgets, particularly computers and tablets. In online learning, all students are required to have gadgets for them to be able to attend classes, which had provided them more exposure to these gadgets and since requirements are digital in online learning, they had allowed themselves to explore their technological skills. In terms of flexibility, the participants were able to adjust their schedules and study lessons using gadgets anywhere and anytime. With online learning, the participants were also able to have more resources like recorded videos, e-books, and online modules provided when studying lessons. These resources mentioned serve as materials for them to use when studying lessons and doing tasks assigned by their teachers. Besides, they felt less pressured since they could be able to submit their assignments and other requirements without needing to come to school and face their teachers. In terms of convenience, participants had felt a sigh of relief because they did not require transportation for them to attend classes since all classes are online. In terms of personal development, the participants made many realizations about themselves. They had decided to prioritize safety since health is their topmost concern. Another thing they had also realized is family is important to spend with.

However, there are numerous inevitable challenges that participants had experienced. In the Philippines, internet connection is one of the top concerns people usually face. This does apply to both public and private school students. Since internet connection requires payment, many of the participants had chosen an affordable internet connection, where they could still have internet connection problems such as weak signal and power interruption. This implied that budget is their enemy in terms of dealing with internet connection in online classes. Another issue was some of them had difficulties in attending online classes due to internet connection problems, which had added to their frustrations with online learning. To cope

with this problem, the participants had decided to adjust to the flow of the internet connection. Some of them had even bought more loads for them to have more mobile data, which also served as their alternate medium for their online classes. It is not a surprise that the participants had expressed frustrations towards tasks due to the difficulty of the lessons being covered since they were extremely new to this modality. They also had felt pressured toward different subjects since they were not used to the online approaches done by their teachers. With the home environmental problems, some of the participants had experienced cramping in doing tasks and reviewing their lessons for their online assessments and felt distracted when attending online classes. This implied that they needed a conducive and quiet learning environment for them to develop their flow in dealing with online learning. Since staying at home for the entire period could lessen their physical activities, participants had felt lazier, which could lead them to cram in tasks and feel unmotivated in classes. To respond to these challenges, the participants had decided to refrain from using social media during online classes and spend leisure time with themselves and friends. They had seen the importance of mental health, which is very important for every person. They had chosen to reinforce themselves by watching movies through Netflix, spending time with friends, and playing games to maintain their sanity. When it comes to online tasks, the teachers provided opportunities for the students to ask questions when they do not understand the instructions for their tasks to do according to the responses of the participants.

Participants might have encountered many challenges in the days of online learning; however, they had received many learning opportunities. First, they were able to develop independence since, in online learning, they had to be self-reliant since they were provided many learning materials for them to be able to cope with the lessons. had implied based on their responses that they learned to improve themselves by enabling themselves to explore new ideas and things and not relying too much on other people when it comes to tasks. This is usually seen when they are given the internet to use. Aside from these, the participants had started to appreciate this modality because they had found out that online learning is for everyone, including people who are not able to go to school due to various commitments such as work and family. Aside from it, it was also indicated students can access online learning wherever they are, which means that online learning is not a hindrance for them to going to different places and enjoying life. With online learning, the participants had agreed that they can also focus on their talents and home-grown skills while studying. They enjoyed being challenged since this modality had allowed them to expand their perspectives about learning and life. They also felt more motivated because they can organize and design their schedule, which can help them balance their activities and to get rid of stress. Online learning enabled the participants to emphasize quality time and mental health, which are the important terms to consider in learning.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This study focuses on the benefits, challenges, and learning opportunities of online learning during the pandemic. Online learning has pros and cons like face-to-face learning. Many participants preferred face-to-face because they were used to that modality until the online learning arrived in public and private schools. Online learning has provided many opportunities for everyone to learn and grow, however like life, it is inevitable for them to encounter various challenges and difficulties. Since the participants are based in the Philippines, it is normal for them to encounter problems with the internet and a shift in education. Since the Philippines is a third-world country, it is inevitable for people to experience poverty, which can be a hindrance to online learning. Without financial resources,

it will be difficult for learners to cope with online learning since the internet requires payment. However, despite the current issues Filipino learners are facing, they have learned a lot of technical skills and have experienced a lot in using technologies when it comes to classes. Based on the responses of the participants, the participants have gained a lot of positive experiences and learning opportunities in online learning. With online learning, they can be able to learn and study lessons anywhere and anytime and perform tasks using their gadgets of choice. Apart from it, they do not need to buy books for them to be able to have learning resources because there are already many resources such as electronic books and websites, which are provided for them. They also have earned many positive traits from this modality. Unlike in face-to-face modalities, they do not have to meet their teachers for them to submit their requirements, but instead, they can just send their requirements via online platforms. It is seen that online learning is self-directed learning because it has enabled them to be independent in learning and more resourceful in using sources for the lessons they are studying. Aside from it, they can also spend time with their families and enjoy leisure time since they are staying at home while having classes.

This study promotes the benefits and opportunities provided by online learning. With online learning, people can have more knowledge of technology and develop flexibility in terms of teaching and learning strategies. The researcher has realized that learning is not only done inside the classroom but it can also be done anywhere and anytime. With the help of the internet, people can gain more information about the topic they want to learn and experience more convenience when it comes to communication. It is recommended that online learning should remain if face-to-face classes return through being integrated into schools, whether public or private. It is suggested that hybrid learning, a combination of face-to-face and online modalities, must be implemented once the pandemic is done.

Acknowledgements

First, I am forever grateful to God the Almighty for His unending love and guidance towards me, especially during the trying times of facing the pandemic and doing this research. I also thank my family, friends, colleagues, and students for their unconditional moral support to me. I also like to give special mention to Rica for guiding me in accomplishing this work, my former colleague, Dary, for inspiring me to participate in this IAFOR conference, and colleagues, Ryan and Jaypee, for motivating me to accomplish this paper.

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