

## *Pagtimakas: Modular Learning Experiences of CAPSU MSC Students*

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### **Abstract**

Hiligaynon is a language used in Western Visayas, Philippines. *Pagtimakás* is a Hiligaynon word meaning to exert oneself or make great efforts. In the Philippines, the Education sector is among the most highly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Capiz State University, Mambusao Satellite College (CAPSU MSC), is situated in a rural area with limited internet connection. Thus, the institution implemented a modular learning approach with little or no face-to-face interaction between students and their instructors and is highly dependent on printed modules to maintain the education of students. Understanding the plight and challenges of these students can be a source of actions and plans that will help them cope and succeed in their academic endeavors. Hence, this study was conducted. The study uses phenomenology to answer the research questions. An in-depth interview using a semi-structured questionnaire was the researcher's data-gathering instrument. Eight students purposively chosen based on inclusivity criteria became participants of the study. Results showed that lack of learning resources, time, and self-paced learning are the challenges the CAPSU MSC students faced. However, students cope with these challenges by seeking help, time management, and a proper mindset and determination. All of these attributes to Bandura's (1997) Self-Efficacy Theory, which states that Self-efficacy refers to the person's belief in their capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance attainments. It is recommended that the institution must incorporate technological innovations to improve modular learning, and awareness of students' knowledge of modular learning is encouraged.

Keywords: Learning Experiences, Challenges, Phenomenology

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## **Introduction**

The education sector is one of the most highly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the Philippines, where there are still growing COVID-19 infections, this study presented some new normal situations in the school setting. Academic institutions have been forced to entirely cancel face-to-face teaching, including laboratories and other learning experiences, as a mitigation step against the risk posed by the Coronavirus. Accordingly, various measures by higher education providers have been initiated to implement social isolation strategies, and online teaching is followed with rapid curriculum transformation.

To respond to the needs of learners, especially of the 3.5 million tertiary-level students enrolled in approximately 2,400 HEIs, certain HEIs in the country have implemented proactive policies for continuing education despite the closure. These policies include modified forms of blended learning that aim to facilitate student learning activities. Despite the calls for an academic freeze due to the coronavirus outbreak, the Department of Education still believes education should not be compromised. The government implemented a distance learning approach to maintain the education of millions of Filipino students. Distance learning is also known as correspondence education or home study. It is a form of instruction with little or no face-to-face interaction between students and their instructors. This type of modality has three categories. One of the highly convenient for most typical Filipino students is Modular Distance Learning. Students are expected to complete the task and submit their outputs at the end of the week. Open communication between the teacher to students and/or teacher to parents/guardians is also part of the norm. This is to ensure and monitor the progress of the students at home.

Learning is considered one of the essential features and characteristics that play a significant role in a nation's progress. In contrast, it positively and comprehensively raises new generations while relying on modern and advanced scientific foundations. This progress is measured by the extent of educators' knowledge of teaching methods, means, and theories and their knowledge of contemporary teaching orientations. For varying reasons, however, different sectors have chastised the proactive, flexible learning measures by HEIs. They argue that "adding more workload for the students increases their burden and contradicts the purpose of the lockdown, which is to help their families prepare and adjust to the situation at hand." Finally, there is an issue about the "lack of environments conducive to learning at home and the effectiveness of the online lectures" (Bagayas, 2020).

This present phenomenon needs to be given attention before it becomes a social problem in the future. Understanding the plight and challenges of these students can be a source of actions and plans that will help them cope and succeed in their academic endeavors. Studies on students' experiences under the modular learning approach in this university, particularly on this campus, need to be explored, hence, this study.

## **Research Questions**

This study sought to determine and understand the lived experiences of CAPSU MSC students on the modular learning approach in the AY 2020-2021. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What challenges do CAPSU MSC students face with the modular learning approach?

2. What are CAPSU MSC students' coping mechanisms for the challenges modular learning brings?
3. What action or plan can be drawn from the study?

## **Literature Review**

On December 31, 2019, the Wuhan health authority reported a group of 27 pneumonia cases stemming from a mysterious etiology (Committee WCH, 2019). The infected cases were linked to the closed Wuhan Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market. Later medical investigations resolved the ambiguity and determined this pneumonia a novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV) or (COVID-19). Then, World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a "public health emergency of international concern" through the Health Regulations Emergency Committee. A month later, on January 30, 2020, WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic (Liguori & Winkler, 2020).

The rapid outbreaks of the virus have shed light globally on the actual threat that the virus possesses. While speculation and uncertainty still exist around the virus, there are no specific vaccines or treatments for COVID-19 (Sohrabi et al., 2020). Therefore, the entire organization worldwide has begun exploring contingency preparedness plans and percussions to confront the COVID-19 pandemic. Like the other industrial sectors, the global higher education sector has been highly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Governments have adopted abundant measures to restrain the extremely pathogen contagious of COVID-19, and these measures beset the education systems worldwide. Quarantine, self-isolation, lockdown, curfew, and the subsequent closure of academic universities and institutions have influenced the normal progress of the educational process. On April 6, 2020, 188 countries enforced interim closure for their educational institutions, as reported by UNESCO, while localized closures have been implemented by several countries, consequently affecting 1,576,021,818 learners. Accordingly, as an emergency response to COVID-19, most educational authorities have argued for sudden online transformations for classes at all levels. However, the issue of the affected groups is how to meet the essential, necessary conditions of remote learning (Eder, 2020).

COVID-19 has immensely influenced academic institutions that rely on the income of these international student (Perrotta, 2020). However, the global trend has moved toward "suspending classes without stopping learning," a contiguous policy launched by the ministry of education in China (Zhang et al., 2020). As the spread of the disease evolved globally, most academic institutions, universities, and schools responded with diverse approaches. Accordingly, the educators converted the curriculums to an online environment and modular approach.

School from Home during the COVID-19 Pandemic has impacted the educational systems of all countries across the globe significantly. In response to this crisis, countries have applied different rules and methods for dealing with changes in the learning system. Within a few months, national educational systems turned to solutions like online methods (using online applications, TV, radio, and offline methods, including printed books and modules. Along with these changes, alterations have been necessary for instructional strategies, technological readiness to implement online learning, and supporting and motivating all concerned parties. While the great hope is that the situation soon returns to normal, in the meantime, changes in national curricula must be made to increase flexibility, and technological readiness must be accelerated.

Due to the COVID-19 crisis, teachers and students both find themselves feeling compelled to embrace the digital academic experience as the summum bonum of the online teaching-learning process. Through digital intelligence (DQ Institute, 2019), teachers can cater to children's digital skills, which are on the brink of cyber risk, into educational opportunities to achieve success in future ventures, especially in this pandemic, where children are wholly dependent on online learning. The Coronavirus is upending life (EdSource, 2020) that caused an enduring threat to our educational institutions from kindergarten to tertiary level and, day by day exacerbated the teaching-learning. Apart from philanthropic efforts, some people hoped to parlay their enterprising skills into profit-making opportunities.

The theoretical perspective of this study focused on the constructivist worldview that recognizes reality as a product of human intelligence interacting with experience in the real world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). It accepts reality as a construct of the human mind; therefore, the reality is perceived as subjective (Corbin, 2007). The observer creates reality by giving meaning to what is observed. In other words, the reality is constructed through a person's operational experience. Therefore, reality needs to be interpreted. In this study, the reality students face is how to survive the daily struggles of modular learning. Students are in a real world of overflowing modules and lecture notes, and how will they be able to.

## **Methodology**

The study is a qualitative design using phenomenology to answer the research questions on the lived experiences of students in CAPSU on the modular learning approach.

The research study utilized the interpretivist phenomenological approach in its methodology. In this approach, it is essential for the researcher as a social actor to appreciate the differences between people (Hadzilias, 2011). The interpretive research assumed that access to reality is only through social constructions such as language, consciousness, shared meanings, shared experiences, and instruments (Creswell, 2014). Moreover, Interpretivism usually focuses on the meaning and may employ multiple methods to reflect different aspects of the issue (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The Interpretivist approach will be supported by other theories that can best explain and understand the purpose of the study. In this study, students have experiences that can be understood based on the meanings ascribed to their stories.

Phenomenology as a methodological approach in this study is understood as the detailed description of experiences in how the subject experiences them. All rely on experience as a valid form of knowledge. Knowledge stems from human experience (Collins, 2010), and, despite being embedded in networks of power, the experience can be helpful (Oksala, 2016).

Qualitative research is a design that looks into a deeper meaning and understanding of the participants' lived experiences (Creswell, 2014). Likewise, it gave many opportunities that assume the value of context and setting. Its main feature is to provide meaningful and more profound explanations of social activities. Creswell (2007) stated that qualitative research was intended to explore, more importantly, the social phenomena by immersing in the situations. Using a modular learning approach, this study understands and investigates students' lived experiences at Capiz State University for the academic year 2020-2021. In gathering evidence, qualitative research relies less on scales and scores. It focuses on in-depth data that reflects the experiences, feelings, and judgments of the participants participating in the investigations. Data was gathered from interviews and focus group discussions of the participants under study.

The study participants were identified using a purposive sampling method based on the following criteria: (a) currently enrolled in CAPSU MSC; (b) willing to participate in the study. There were eight participants included in the study. The researcher asked for their permission before they were considered as participants. Moreover, their identities are not exposed.

The researcher used the semi-structured interview protocol as a tool for gathering data. Computer data analysis was also utilized with the use of NVivo12. NVivo12 is a qualitative data analysis (QDA) computer software package produced by QSR International. It has been designed for qualitative researchers working with rich text-based and/or multimedia information, where deep levels of analysis on small or large volumes of data are required.

Ethics and the safety of informants have an extraordinary emphasis in any research work. Accordingly, utmost care was used to ensure the anonymity and safety of participants. Participants in this study were informed through informed consent of the anonymity of their identity, about the research goals, and that they could skip questions or stop at any time.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Challenges faced by the CAPSU MSC students on the modular learning approach**

According to Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (oecd.org), the current COVID-19 crisis has obliged most education systems to adopt face-to-face teaching and learning alternatives. Many education systems moved activities online to allow instruction to continue despite school closures. Accordingly, the educators converted the curriculums to an online environment and modular approach. This conversion and the shift in the mode of instruction pose struggles to students who play an integral part in the new normal education. Based on the result of this study, the students at CAPSU Mambusao Satellite College encountered various challenges in modular learning modalities amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

It can be seen that the students' challenges are lack of learning resources, lack of time, and self-paced learning. As the study's locale, the institution opted to use printed modules. However, some materials must be downloaded online to supplement the lessons. This results in need for more learning resources as one of the challenges the students encounter. Dayagbil, Palompon, et al. (2021), in their study, pointed out that students reported that the majority of them were unable to accomplish the tasks assigned by the teachers due to their inability to access the learning resources uploaded on the internet.

Moreover, they need more suitable gadgets to finish the tasks. A study by Boca (2021) confirms that there are also some inequalities regarding internet access (no telephone signal, needing a laptop/computer/tablet/mobile phone, and a reasonably low level of digital skills). Moreover, the locations of the participants prohibit them from having a clear and stable internet connection. Thus, students unanimously reiterated that poor internet connectivity hinders them from accessing other learning materials. Inequalities in internet connection and personal gadgets were prevalent issues among the participants. The Guidance and Counseling Services office reported in 2019 that most students enrolled in the institution were categorized under the poverty threshold with a monthly income of 10,000 and below. Thus, internet connections and personal gadgets are not readily available, resulting in limited access to learning materials.

As for the lack of time, students experienced more difficulties managing their time and regulating their attention and efforts and reported needing more motivation than before the pandemic (Wiradhanyz et al., 2021). Thus, the participants need help with how they will use their time. Essel and Owusu (2017) found that having domestic responsibilities and responsibilities related to a job while in school are among the sources of stress for most students. It was also found that they are aware of the deadlines of their requirements, but they tend to forget it unless it is the day before the submission. This is observed when a participant stated that the *"deadline pressures me to finish all the activities."* Essel and Owusu (2017) also claimed that an increase in class workload stresses students because when students have to do more than they can handle, they get frustrated and cannot focus and think straight. Although Dunham (2020) stated that losing track of time during this pandemic is a common occurrence, it is to be noted that the bulk of activities stipulated in the modules may contribute to the pressure felt by the participants. Thus, in doing so, they need more time to finish their modules.

Regarding self-paced learning, Sason and Kellerman's (2021) study found that teacher-student interaction is one of the most significant contributors to students' motivation, satisfaction, and ability to cope with learning assignments. However, since the participants use printed modules, learning must be self-paced, and interaction is limited. For example, a participant highlighted their difficulty in this self-paced learning by stating, *"it is difficult to absorb the lessons without another more knowledgeable person who can explain complicated topics appropriately."*

Gray and DiLoreto (2016) postulated that increased learner interaction, student engagement, and instructor presence positively affect student satisfaction and perceived learning. In their study, Dela Cruz et al. (2022) recommended that colleges and universities generate new instructional methodologies in the new normal that will enable feedback and interaction. Teachers should continue communicating with their students, and institutions should consider ways to reach out to students to address their educational needs.

### **Coping mechanisms of CAPSU MSC students on the challenges brought about by modular learning**

As students face different challenges in implementing modular learning, they strive to overcome them through different approaches. An interesting coping mechanism enforced by the participants is *"seeking help."* A participant mentioned, *"I usually ask for help from my professors and friends. I do not hesitate to ask them, especially my teachers, if there is something unclear for me/ I do not understand about the topics or questions."* The participants' responses showed that they cope with their struggles by seeking support from others. This support is usually emotional or academic. Students get emotional support from advice, sympathy, and encouraging words from their friends, parents, or teachers. This result is congruent with Guevarra and Ciman's (2017) study, where students' primary coping strategy is social support. Social support refers to getting advice from others, talking to someone with similar experiences, discussing feelings, getting sympathy, or telling someone how you feel. Students feel that their feelings towards the uncomfortable situation or the problem are valid when they think they are heard. Kwaah and Essilfie (2017) also claimed that getting emotional support from friends and family is an effective way of coping with students' stress. Since students' life is stressful, students need the understanding and sympathy of their friends and family, especially when they are experiencing significant pressure from their academic workload. Calo et al. (2021) recommended that schools help students cope

effectively with stress. It should be more open and willing to extend social support for students in the new normal by utilizing different social media platforms.

Proper time management was also found to be the most used coping mechanism of the participants. For example, a participant echoed this idea, *"By giving specific time to study my modules and attending webinars on how to manage stress in modular learning or related to mental health also help me to cope with it."* Interestingly, another participant shared their time management technique, *"What I have employed is giving at least 2-4 hours per day of studying the modules. Taking a break from social media also helps me stay focused on my studies."* Based on the respondents' responses, managing one's time effectively copes with the struggles of modular distance learning. Having time management has given students satisfaction in finishing their modules on time. Hearon (2015) and Young (2017) recommended that students develop time management skills to help reduce work stress. These techniques and skills can help students manage their time more effectively and have more control over their time. Guevarra (2017) further stated that managing one's time ineffectively can often be a source of stress. Establishing priorities and working to these is an effective way of managing one's time.

Another coping mechanism that arose in the study is the proper mindset and determination. Faced with uncertainties in the new normal, participants shared their thoughts on coping with the difficulties they experienced in learning in the new normal. A participant mentioned, *"When I feel like giving up, and there's much destruction in my surroundings, I always realize why I started and how important it is to finish what I am doing."* This was echoed in the answer of another participant *"Once you are dedicated to achieving your goals, you will always find ways to make it possible even how hard you may take and no matter how many obstacles you have faced along the way."* Another participant highlighted their "willingness" to learn: *"Although I prefer to learn in the face-to-face discussion but showing my willingness to understand and to answer my modules and also with the help of our professors that are hands-on to respond with our concerns related to our modules, I can say that I can pass and I can graduate with modular learning."* Lastly, the determination was very evident in the answer of a participant, *"I do my best to understand all the topics written in the modules."* Based on the responses of the participant, during this time of the pandemic, they could perceive themselves as someone who could overcome everything, especially their academic endeavors.

### **A plan of action can be drawn from the results of the study**

Results of the study showed that the students wanted an actual discussion, especially on the major subjects, and giving feedback on their performance in modular learning. The actual discussion, primarily on the major subjects, is one of the themes evident in the participants' answers. Unanimously, they advocated for honest or face-to-face discussions, especially on significant subjects. This emphasized the need for the participants for social interaction and feedback on the teacher's part. Leach and Walker (2000) argue that the instructor's feedback is essential to students in distance education for their self-evaluation, task orientation, instructor support, and flexibility. Also, they indicated that the degree level of students' experience with technology directly correlates to whether or not the technology used in distance education is a barrier. Technology concerns must be minimized for a successful online education, and programs must be designed accordingly.

Giving feedback is another theme revealed in the study. Three participants stated that a Lack of feedback from the course facilitator was observed in learning in the new normal. To quote their statements, *"I guess the instructor should exert some time to talk or meet their students to discuss the topics in the modules and for them to know the feedback of the students," "Feedbacking is significant in times like this as we do not have any idea how was our performance so far" and "There is little to no feedback regarding what we have learned and if our answers are correct."* A participant stated that the course facilitator must *"offer and allow the students to discuss any concerns that might have arisen in modular learning."* The participants believe in the importance of communication. Since participants generally reported a need for more feedback and attention from their instructors, a strong feedback mechanism must be appropriately integrated into the teaching strategies of the course facilitators. Offir et al., 2003 state that In a distance environment, the student's ability and disposition to self-monitor and accurately evaluate content comprehension and request help may represent a crucial variable affecting learning and teaching processes. In a distance learning environment, instructors need more direct access to verbal and nonverbal feedback from their students. This feedback enables the teacher in a conventional learning environment to use verbal and nonverbal signals to adjust the instructional process in real-time to meet their student's needs. For example, effective instructors often re-organize and repeat content in response to students' confused expressions and off-task behavior. However, unlike instructors in a conventional learning environment, distance learning instructors cannot monitor, decode simultaneously, and use student feedback to modify instruction "online." In a synchronous distance learning environment, the instructor frequently stops teaching to ask students whether they understood the presented content.

### **Recommendations**

The university must produce modular learning coupled with technological innovations to help students and teachers utilize their time and knowledge to achieve goals and make modular teaching-learning easy. The school and other stakeholders may extend their help and assistance to students in coping with these challenges. Strong feedback mechanism needs to be appropriately integrated into the teaching strategies of the course facilitator; In-service training for faculty equipping them with the current trends of new normal education is important in modular learning. The University must think and plan for various activities to help the students reduce their stress and burden and keep themselves motivated, and awareness of students' knowledge of modular learning is encouraged.

### **Conclusion**

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the educational system, particularly on students' learning experiences. The transition to modular learning has brought about several concerns, including less engagement with teachers, a shortage of resources and appropriate technology, and issues with time management and attention regulation.



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