Navigating Remote Learning Experiences of Graduate School Students: From the Backdrop of COVID-19 Pandemic

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**Abstract:** The health crisis does not only reduced mobility but also redesigned the educational learning milieu. With the growing needs to offer relevant education despite the health situations, education must continue and serve its purpose. To achieve the learning continuity plan amidst the pandemic, remote learning has become a byword among teachers and learners. This situation gives realization to online learning modality among the students. This study seeks to document the lived experiences of graduate school students as they embark for the first time in online learning. Utilizing phenomenology as a research method, this study involved 10 participants as key informants and 7 students in Focus Group Discussion. The following themes were identified in research question number 1 regarding the online learning experiences of the students: Technological Literacy and Competency Challenges, Instability of Internet Connection, Dealing with Unfavorable Learning Condition, Establishing Self-Regulation Practices, Taking Advantage of the Modality. For question number 2 about essential skills that students like them need to master in online learning, the following themes were identified: Digital Literacy Skills, Soft Skills, and Time Management Skill. For question number 3 regarding the insights of the students, the following are the themes identified: Adapt to the New Normal Education, Advocate Autonomous Learning, Keep the Hopes High.

**Keywords:** Remote Learning Experiences, Graduate School Students, Online Learning, Qualitative Phenomenology Research, Philippines

**1. Introduction**

The absence of education amidst global health crisis can bring serious issues in the global economy. As such, educational institutions opted to offer remote learning to maintain academic activities of schools and universities going. At this time of the pandemic, this learning modality is the modest available option to swing away from jeopardizing academic calendars and to continue education despite the presence of health threats. More so, the remote learning environment is seen to address the seemingly irreversible future educational crisis should a lockdown of educational institutions continue to persist.

In its truest sense, COVID-19 has dramatically altered the educational learning landscape and it has continued to affect the overwhelming majority of the graduate students from all over the world, including the students of Davao Del Sur State College. As school closures have become a byword among the many institutions, graduate school students in this local state college choose to thrive in the remote learning modality in lieu of the traditional classroom setting with a hope to earn the graduate degree diploma.

While school closures have unprecedentedly altered the school system, the graduate school students of Davao Del Sur State College who have not been in remote learning experience, attend online classes totally unprepared of what it will look like, thereby experiencing problems as they shifted to remote education. Among the notable issue these students have to deal with is the intermittent internet connectivity which fuels anxiety every time they are asked to engage in the discussions but suddenly left the online platform due to poor internet connectivity. This situation has been a usual occurrence but has a negative impact on their learning as they become disconnected in the loop.

Meanwhile, apart from the poor internet connectivity, these graduate school students who yet to figure out how to navigate online platform continue to experience anxiety over the incapacity to use the virtual platform. In most instances that these students are about to unmute themselves in their attempt to engage in the exchanging of ideas in the synchronous learning modality, they unintentionally click end call button which makes them entirely disconnected in the virtual class.
The stress these students face in navigating online class continues to accumulate every time they attend video conferences class. Their coping mechanism usually shrinks upon the idea that despite their age and the level of the educational ladder they are enrolled at, they still have issues on technology that results to poor class engagement. Likewise, this being unfamiliar with how the virtual platform works has become a profound reason of the undesirable learning motivation and absorption of the lesson if not mastered.

This remote learning setup has captured the interest of the researchers in order to gather empirical evidence as they can be useful in decision-making especially on how to improve the future of instruction of the school. Likewise, gaining understanding on the experiences of the graduate school students in remote learning environment is a beneficial option knowing that the popularity of remote learning will continue to rise in the years ahead.

Research Questions

Educators in the graduate degree program are one with other educational leaders in different levels around the globe to investigate the lived experience of our graduate school students as we transitioned to remote learning modality. As instructors of these students, we want to document their experiences and reflect on these to understand the situation in their context. We intend to uncover the goal through interview by asking these questions:

1. How will you describe your online learning experience?
2. What skills do you think are essential in navigating online learning?
3. What advise you give to other students enrolled in online learning modality?

Theoretical Framework

This study is seen through the lens of constructivist social learning theories of Vygotsky (1978). This theory dictates that individual and social aspects are responsible in the process of learning. It is believed that constructivism is essential in the individual’s cognitive process of learning and social constructivism plays a role in social interaction which also affects learning of an individual.

Further, it is noted that the experience of a learner helps improve acquisition of learning and when these experiences are shared through interactions, learning takes place and is developed which has potential to foster critical thinking among the learners (Dewey, 1938; Gokhale, 1995).

In the context of this study, graduate school students have experiences which cultivate their learning. Through online class, as a modality of the students, they interact with their classmates and professors and share their experiences to enrich class discussions and lessons thereby enriching their learning.

2. Methods

Research Design

This study utilized descriptive phenomenology as an approach to study the lived experiences of the graduate school students in our school, who for the first time undergo online learning. From the point of view of Creswell (2013) phenomenology is an approach to qualitative research that focuses on the commonality of a lived experience within a particular group. The fundamental goal of the approach is to arrive at a description of the nature of the phenomenon.

As a support to the use of descriptive phenomenology, Giorgi (1997) identified that this approach is used when little is known about an issue. More so, this approach is used when the researchers wanted to make clear and understand the most essential meaning of a phenomenon of interest from the perspective of those directly involved in it. As researchers, we found that descriptive phenomenology is the best approach to use in this study because our intention is to identify the shared experiences of our students as they undergo online learning. Likewise, in this study, we intend to locate the universal nature of the experiences of our participants in the newly implemented learning modality and eventually being able to identify the essence of their experience in the online
learning.

Participants

The participants of this study were those students enrolled in Master of Arts in Education major in Educational Management. These students have undergone online learning as the schools were not allowed to conduct face-to-face to classes due to the pandemic. In choosing the participants, we ensured that the students gave their honest response to the question during the conduct of the interview and were willing to participate in the conduct of the study. We do not have special inclusion criteria set in identifying the participants of this research since all students in the school are qualified to be part of the participants. From the list, we interviewed 10 students in the Key Informant Interviews and 7 in the Focus Group Discussion.

Data Analysis

In analyzing data, we analyzed the students’ responses in the open-ended questions and the transcribed FGD using the predetermined categories in the conceptual framework. Specifically, we used multilevel coding in classifying the codes from the transcripts (Birks & Mills, 2011). As a process, we identify similar codes based on the responses in the interviews and we categorized the codes according to how they are related to each other. A thorough analysis was employed to determine the themes of each question from the participants. To ensure the reliability of the analysis, two coders independently analyzed the qualitative data. Both coders familiarize themselves with the purpose, research questions, research method, and codes and coding scheme of the study.

3. Results

The interview of the participants provided a clear picture of how they navigate the online learning for the first time in their academic learning. While their experiences vary from one to another, we see some points that these students shared the same experiences which we highlight in the themes generated for every question asked from them.

1. How will you describe your online learning experience?

For research question number one, there are five themes emerged based on the interview conducted. The first theme is Technological Literacy and Competency Challenges. From the point of view of Said (2021), adult learners in the Higher Education Institution undergoing online education needs to acquire technological literacy for them to be fully engaged in the lesson and be able to get through with the challenges in the online class as a modality. This is supported by the statement of Scanlon, McAndrew & O'Shea, (2015) who believed that adult learners may survive the challenges of the online classroom if they are technologically competent or at least they are proficient in using different media platforms utilized in school. Similarly, this theme is supported by Kent, Laslo & Rafaeli, (2016) as they suggested that students’ important tool in online class is their ability to manipulate technology and use them appropriately. This knowledge will advance the students in dealing with the challenges of the online learning better that the students who know nothing about technology use in education.

The second theme that emerged from question number one is Instability of Internet Connection. The Philippines has among the slowest internet connection in Asia ranking 72nd in the world with 35.03 Mbps according to Speed test Global Index in the 2021 rankings. This slow internet connectivity is due to underdeveloped network infrastructure and low uptake of digital services thereby affecting education of the students even in the graduate school program.

The poor internet access among the students resulted to challenges in terms of slow downloading of reference materials as these students wanted to read more literatures about their lessons and they experience delays in uploading completed work.
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<th>ESSENTIAL THEMES</th>
<th>THEMATIC STATEMENT</th>
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| **TECHNOLOGICAL LITERACY AND COMPETENCY CHALLENGES** | Do not know how to interface with the online platform  
Unfamiliar with the icons  
Limited knowledge on how to operate the platform  
Cannot immediately locate microphone icon  
Do not know how to mute other participants  
Difficulty in sharing presentation  
Cannot fix cam  
Do not know how to record the conference  
Unacquainted with the basic functions of the icons  
Learning to adjust with the use of the gadget and with platform use for class  
Find time to learn the functions of the icons in the online platform  
Cannot fix malfunctioning laptop computer |
| **INSTABILITY OF INTERNET CONNECTION** | The computer suddenly lags due to weak internet  
The presentation is stopped due to lost internet connection  
The house has poor internet strength  
The discussion appears incomprehensible due to poor connection  
Classmates suddenly left the conference unintentionally due to poor internet connection  
Students are disconnected with the online class  
Cannot confidently engage in the discussion due to weak internet |
| **DEALING WITH UNFAVOURABLE LEARNING CONDITION** | Students hear noises in the house of their classmates  
There are too many requirements to accomplish  
Anxiety increases when disconnected to class  
Has only very limited time to engage with professors  
The frequency of power outage disconnects students from the class  
The unnecessary noises from the streets are heard in the class during discussions  
There is information overload |
| **ESTABLISHING SELF-REGULATION PRACTICES** | Find alternatives to stay connected in the online class  
Have a standby gadget ready to use when one is not working well  
Show willingness to adjust in the online class  
Manifest interest to adopt to the challenges of online class  
Negotiate to professors regarding submission deadlines of the class academic requirements  
Accepts the challenge of the online class while enjoying the experience  
Acquire technical skills and enhance computer manipulation  
Maximize potentials in exploring the benefits and the challenges of the online class |
| **TAKING ADVANTAGE OF THE MODALITY** | Develop new skills in the online class  
Acquire competence to use different online tools for the class  
Doing multi-tasking at home while attending to online lesson  
Enjoying the engagement with classmates virtually  
Feeling happy to continue the study despite the absence of face-to-face class  
Has time to research for answer when asked by professor  
Grateful for not being able to travel from home to school |
Perform other tasks while attending virtual class  
Can keep learning materials in numbers  
Students can learn anywhere they may be

There by unintentionally missing some deadline targets (Garrote Jurado, Petersson, Christie, Seoane & Sigreñ, 2010). Likewise, students having a slow internet access complain that in a synchronous class, they have to deal with being cut out for minutes or worst at a time during the class session and this worsens their experience in an online learning (Iftakhar, 2016).

The third theme that emerged under question number one is Unfavorable Learning Condition. There have been studies conducted that online class is one best way to address learning problems and its is regarded as one option that bridges students and instructors in a remote learning classroom. Technology has been pointed out as a helpful tool to engage in an online classroom on different levels. In fact, the study of Gikas and Grant (2013) revealed how technology provides opportunities for interaction among the students.

However, there are studies that revealed that online classes are not as effective as it may seem as students have to deal with unfavorable learning situation. To justify this claim, Zounek & Sudicky (2013) argued that students in an online learning environment deal with communication and information overload. This has posed a challenge among the students on how they can maximize the information shared during class. For these students, this is among the list of the unfavorable learning condition in online learning that has taken toll on their mental health.

Another essential theme that identified in question number one is Establishing Self-Regulation Practices. Self-regulation is seen as a positive construct among educators as this implies that students in the graduate school can manage their academic affairs.

The result of this study is in congruence with the statement of Schunk, Meece & Pintrich, (2014) who posited that students who practice self-regulation in online class manifest a capacity to use met cognitive and behavioral processes to master learning competency and eventually achieve performance goal. With students who manage to find the best alternatives to turn negative experiences in an online class, they most likely finish the course learning life-skills aside from the content of the program they enrolled. (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2011).

Taking advantage of the Modality is among the themes that emerged from question number one. The participants of this study noted that while at some instance they feel that online class requires them to devote full time attention than the usual face-to-face classes, the graduate school students revealed that they are making advantage of the modality the best possible way they can.

The result of this study is aligned with the statement of Zounek & Sudicky (2013) who declared that online classes which utilized computer technology allows the students to learn anywhere and anytime. These students no longer worry of not being prepared in terms of dressing up for school or any similar preparation since the virtual classroom is just a click away and they instantly attend classes. Another way which students take advantage of the online learning modality is the fact that the students can easily share and access unlimited learning resources which they can download and read sometime. These materials enrich the students’ understanding of the lessons they have in their classes.

2. What skills do you think are essential in navigating online learning?

For research question number 2, there are three essential themes emerged based in the interview. These are the following: Digital Literacy Skills, Soft Skills, and Time Management Skill. While going through the coding process and identification of themes from the transcript of the interviews, we found out that the graduate school students need the identified skills to advance in their studies. However, for us working as instructors in the graduate degree program, the identified skills that are essential in navigating online learning are century skills.

The first theme identified in question number 2 is Digital Literacy Skills. We believe that skill is necessary for students not only in the graduate school program but also in baccalaureate degrees. Students in the basic
education levels are expected to develop the same skills as this is important not only in school but also in the world of work.

The result of the study is akin to the pronouncement of Al Khateeb (2017) who pointed out that students need to acquire digital literacy skills for them to navigate online learning with ease. When students have a technical know-how in manipulating computers, designing online presentation, and use advanced search strategies to find reliable information on the internet such as using web feeds, among others, they are most likely to succeed in their quest for higher learning. In this age, any student who knows less about computer technology is expected to lag in the academic quest.

The second theme identified in question number 2 is Soft Skills. The students believed that soft skills are tools in navigating online class. These skills include being adaptable, flexible, and collaboration. While these skills are important in online learning, we also believe that soft skills are important not only in acquiring a degree but also at work.

The result of the study is congruent to the statement of Dean (2019) who stated that interactions they may be in school or at work require some level of soft skills to get tasks done. Hence, it is important that students must develop some degree of soft skills to easily cope with the demands of academic requirements. Meanwhile, those who lack soft skills might have a limited potential to advance. A potential degree of soft skills can positively influence task completion and self-improvement.

Another theme that is identified in question number 2 is Time Management Skill. This skill helps the postgraduate students able to manage their schedule and essentially comply all the academic requirements on time. According to Sevari & Kandy (2011), time management must be mastered by students to be organized in the task to do. Being able to manage time means a student gets to know which should be done first and which is next. This helps students identify the tasks which are urgent and those which can be delayed in favor of other tasks.

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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DIGITAL LITERACY SKILLS</td>
<td>Being tech-savvy helps in navigating online platform</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Knowledge in computer makes submission of requirements with ease</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Knowing how to use online platform increases confidence</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Knowledge on how the platform works lessens anxiety in navigating online class</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Being able to explore the features of online platform use in the class adds interest to engage in the online learning</td>
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<td>Having knowledge in utilizing online platform helps in the online class</td>
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<tr>
<td>SOFT SKILLS</td>
<td>Flexibility helps adapt in the new normal of learning</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Being adaptable ensures helps in dealing with the challenges of the online class</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Flexibility can lighten the pressure in adjusting the new normal of learning</td>
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<td>Being able to communicate the ideas helps in accomplishing the tasks easily</td>
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<td>Working with classmates can help in on time submission of the academic requirements</td>
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<td>Cooperation with the classmates help accomplish reports</td>
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<td>Being patient helps in getting through the challenges in online learning</td>
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TIME MANAGEMENT SKILL

- Avoiding procrastination helps meet accomplishment of academic requirements
- Organizing the tasks help manage the time
- Prioritizing tasks that need to be done first guides in accomplishing list of to-do things
- Focusing on the timeline to accomplish work helps in performing all tasks
- Keeping a list of things to do and their timeline guides in doing the work to accomplish

3. What advise you give to other students enrolled in online learning modality?

For research question number 3, there are three themes identified. These are the following: Adapt to the New Normal Education, Advocate Autonomous Learning, and Keep the Hopes High.

The first theme identified for this question is Adapt to the New Normal Education. When the pandemic paralyzed mobility, its effect is gradually felt by the different sector including education. As instructors, we have many apprehensions on how we can implement remote learning and advance learning continuity despite the challenges posed by the pandemic.

With the many adjustments, the school system has adopted a modality that allows students to continue learning while they are at the comfort of their home. The first few months were never easy and students and instructors attempted to make things feasible. While amid transition from face-to-face learning to online class, many students complain and highlight their challenges. However, everyone realizes that the best way to keep

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| ADAPT TO THE NEW NORMAL EDUCATION | Online class might be challenging but adapting to its process will help in acquiring a degree  
Blending with the trends of online class easily facilitates adjustments  
Advocate learning online tools to adapt to the new normal  
Extend time to familiarize online platform to blend with the trend  
Explore different platforms to be familiar with them when they are utilized in the class  
Invest in durable and reliable gadgets for online class  
Have a reliable internet connectivity to be able to attend classes without hassle |
| ADVOCATE AUTONOMOUS LEARNING | Be responsible to deepen knowledge learn in the online class  
Keep responsible for other important point of the lesson by studying them  
Reinforce learning by reading materials that will help deepen the understanding of then lesson  
Develop strategy that will help in convenient way of learning concepts  
Be independent in discovering other details of the lesson by studying when necessary  
Be familiar with credible online sources to research for the lesson  
Keep copy of the topics and read them to deepen understanding of the lesson |
KEEP THE HOPES HIGH

Trust that the challenges in online learning will be overcome
Develop positive thoughts that the online class will bring meaningful lesson
Do not quit with the studies
The online class will give the same results as face-to-face teaching
Be motivated and believe that learning can take place in online modality
Advocate learning continuity and believe that learning can still happen in an online class modality

going through the odds is to adapt to the new normal. This statement is supported by Corpuz (2021) who reinforced that adaptation to the new normal facilitates smooth navigation of online learning.

Another theme that is generated in question number 3 is Advocate Autonomous Learning. Many students agreed that the limited time in virtual class is sometimes insufficient as they have many requirements to accomplish. It is in the same manner that the students believe that to cope with the challenges in distant learning, students need to advocate autonomous independent learning. The result of this study is consistent with the statement of Maphalala, Mkhasibe & Mncube (2021) who stated that self-directed learning helps students keep track with their lessons and with their requirements. Being able to review and intensify knowledge on the lessons allows students to discover in-depth understanding of the lesson.

The pandemic caused unspeakable anxiety and has altered our way of life. Everyone fears for the many uncertainties, and this resulted to many mental health issues. However, despite the numerous challenges, keeping hopes high can help students get to the right path. The result of the study is similar to the statement of Ruzlin, Chen, Yunus, Samsudin, Selamat & Ismail (2021) who stated that it is hope that fuels enthusiasm and perseverance among the students. It is hope that connects students between the challenges in the online class to finishing the degree. With hope, students look forward that their current circumstance will be changed in a way that they can enjoy the good things that their learning in online class bring.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This research interviewed only postgraduate students in one program as participants. Hence, it is appropriate to refer this study to one group instead of attributing its results to all postgraduate students in the college. As researchers, we could have utilized purposive sampling technique which will include other students from all courses to ensure that there is a well-representation of participants from other degrees.

RECOMMENDATION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The conduct of this research led us to understand the lived experiences of the postgraduate students. It calls us to reflect on the current practice of the school and subsequently offer options and alternatives to make the learning experience of the students meaningful and convenient for both the students and the instructors.

Likewise, as ways forward, the researchers proposed to replicate the study with the inclusion of other programs to ensure that all courses are well-represented ensuring that inclusivity is achieved in the conduct of the future research.

The researchers also recommend to the future researchers to conduct study focused on the digital literacy, readiness, and ICT competency of the students since these are the topics that need to discover and be given special attention to ensure that learning can take place.

What we have included in this research are some of the few interesting notes about the topic covered. We recognized that this study has not fully reached the generalizability that researchers and scholars hope to see. But for topics such as this, the experiences of the participants of this research may be far different from students of different groups. We believe that smaller-scaled, micro studies are needed to fully understand all the nuances of experience that the participants of the study endure.
We also believe that there is a room for a greater variety of perspectives concerning the topic among the research participants. We choose to write from the perspectives of the research participants, but another study could examine the academic life of these participants through the lens of the teachers.

There are also certainly for other research opportunities to consider in terms of the research participant’s demographics. Our study is only limited to the experiences of the students in online learning, the issue on relevant pedagogical practices of teacher might warrant a separate research endeavor.

Beyond the issue of location, level, and perspective, we also believe that there are larger issues that require future research concerning another setting. Many students in different localities across the province and the country continue to be academically disengaged in the online learning. More research need to be done so that they will be learning engagement to take place to these students.

REFERENCES


