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Lived Experiences of Struggling Students in E-Learning

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Abstract

Higher education has relied on e-learning as a medium to maintain quality education during the COVID-19 pandemic. With this, excellent instruction has been maintained. This study examines the experiences and problems encountered in e-learning in higher education from the viewpoint of struggling students. From nine participants enrolled in various university programs, students' responses were analysed. As a result, this study emphasises three key themes: 1) the experiences of struggling students with e-learning; 2) the difficulties of struggling students with e-learning; and 3) the influence of e-learning on students' academic achievements. This study has a variety of implications for both teaching practice and future research. The results imply that since individuals' learning styles and techniques vary, course information may not readily transfer from a conventional classroom to an online learning environment. In this phenomenological investigation into the lived reality of e-learning, three primary motivations were identified: asynchronous learning, support acquisition, and social engagement. Attempts should be made to eliminate feelings of isolation and integrate tactics that promote engagement and a sense of belonging into the course's design. Not always is the use of new technology required to produce learning outcomes and student satisfaction. Rather, a focus on subject clarity and high-quality learning tools is often sufficient. Despite juggling several tasks during a challenging period, this particular set of university students would be inspired to continue studying to achieve

their own objectives due to the flexibility and ease of this modality. In light of this study's findings, educational institutions' use of e-learning should be reconsidered. These results also call for a reconsideration of how educational institutions employ e-learning to diverse learners. For struggling students to develop a continuous and meaningful learning environment, it is crucial to examine online activities that promote social connections, professors who are helpful, and the many technical elements that stimulate cooperation. Therefore, it is vital to develop policies that promote relevant learning experiences.

Keywords: Online learning challenges, e-learning, students experiences, struggling students, digital learning barriers

Introduction

E-learning refers to the learning experience that takes place through the use of electronic devices connected to the internet in synchronous or asynchronous environments. Historically, e-learning has been underutilised, particularly in underdeveloped nations. However, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, our educational system has adjusted to accept new modes of instruction – from face-to-face to entirely remote, or a hybrid. The internet has come to play a critical and important part in all students' academic lives. Textbooks and reference materials, as well as daily assignments and lectures have been phased out in favour of modules and other online resources. This kind of instruction cleared the door for apps like Facebook Messenger, Zoom, and Google Meet to become indispensable for both students and teachers. The widespread usage of these apps to conduct online classes and courses demonstrates that students require reliable, quick, and easy internet access. However, an area of concern facing students living in rural areas is the lack of high-speed internet to attend lectures and conduct evaluations. This is a structural issue: Students from the poorest households who lack access to the internet are more likely to be denied an education, hence aggravating already pronounced educational inequalities.

E-learning was significantly impacted by poor or no connectivity. As more users simultaneously access the internet, network congestion becomes more likely, which can lead to ,lower speeds and internet connectivity. School closures have shown a range of barriers to education access, as well as more widespread socio-economic concerns, but their impact is disproportionately harsh on low-income families (Owusu-Fordjour et al., 2020). In a world where rapid, simple access to critical information is required to learn, many students' academic futures are jeopardised by a lack of internet connectivity. Additionally, it places students in a position where they are unable to continue their study if internet connectivity is not easily available to them (Souvik, 2021). Slow or limited internet connectivity has a significant impact on a student's ability to succeed academically in an online learning environment (Thorburn, 2021). In Ireland, according to recent research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on second-level education (Mohan et al., 2020), over half of schools questioned cited challenges to availability of high-speed broadband and/or adequate digital devices for their students.

Meanwhile, in the Philippines, after President Rodrigo Duterte's announcement of 'no vaccination, no face-to-face classes,' the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) directed colleges to begin planning for distant learning. Several colleges have faced numerous instructional challenges (Mateo, 2020) which have proven tough for Filipino university students to overcome. Complicating matters further is the fact that not every student is capable of providing for and adapting to the rapid advancements of technology in today's digital age (Alvarez, 2020), particularly in developing countries like the Philippines, where education was already plagued by problems prior to the pandemic. E-learning demonstrates a disparity between students who have reliable access to digital devices and internet connectivity and those who lack these essential resources (Santos, 2020). One of the most common issues encountered by struggling students enrolled in distance education is unstable internet access. Typically, this is caused by geographic location (Rotas & Cahapay, 2020). A 2019 national survey revealed that 82.3% of households nationwide do not have internet access (Tamayo, 2021). Senator Sherwin Gatchalian underlined the need to address inadequate internet connectivity and a shortage of devices for learners to continue their education throughout the pandemic. According to him, devices and internet access are as vital to our students and their families as water and electricity (Tamayo, 2021). This current state of remote learning is likely to worsen the already existing disparities in students' access to digital devices, internet connectivity, and technological support, which in turn create obstacle to effective online education. Lack of policy and frequent technology failures were among the obstacles to e-learning. The majority of obstacles and issues identified were attributable to a lack of e-learning-specific training, policies, and guidelines (Al Shamari & Dalil, 2022; Deng & Sun, 2022; Naveed et al., 2022; Qazi et al., 2022). The majority of students in the universities included in this study were dissatisfied with the e-learning process, according to other recent research (Taher et al., 2022). Previously, the most significant obstacles were reported to be the lack of e-learning specific training, policies, and guidelines; however, in the present study, participants identified power outages and sluggish internet speeds as the primary barriers.

Distance education, which was first documented in 1728 by Caleb Phillips as a 'correspondence study,' was the forerunner of e-learning (Holmberg et al., 2005; Kentnor, 2015 as cited by Islam et al., 2021). At the turn of the 21st century, the internet redefined distant education and transformed it into e-learning. Numerous studies on e-learning in various countries have been undertaken, as emergencies such as wars, conflicts, natural disasters, disease outbreaks, and economic repercussions have a direct influence on education. UNICEF (2018) estimates that around 35 million children are being denied an education as a result of conflict or disaster. In Yemen and South Sudan, armed groups have destroyed or seized hundreds of schools. In Pakistan, numerous schools were converted into temporary shelters in the aftermath of Cyclone Sidr in 2007 and the 2010 floods. Similarly, in 2013, the Ebola epidemic in West Africa forced the closure of schools throughout the region. In such instances, distance learning has always aided in the continuation of education. In the final years of the Iraq-Iran War, television channels in Iran were utilised for this purpose (Nassir, 2020). During wars in Syria, Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Afghanistan, short-term open, distant, and flexible learning (ODFL) was offered. New Zealand had measles epidemics in 1991, 1997, and 2011, and for some weeks, all children in the country received distant education (Creed & Morpeth, 2014).

Following the 2011 earthquake there, the University of Canterbury promptly implemented e-learning technology for its students, including a learning management system, web conferencing, recorded voice, and video (Ayebi-Arthur, 2017). More recently, Najran University in Saudi Arabia used e-learning initiatives to offer online lectures and evaluations while the campus remained closed owing to the political turmoil with Yemen (Rajab, 2018).

The recent global outbreak of COVID-19 has provided another example in which e-learning has been viewed as a lifesaver by and for academic institutions. The duration of this crisis has resulted in a stronger reliance on e-learning than ever before. In this approach, e-learning continues to complement traditional classrooms, making teaching and learning conceivable, feasible, and adaptable. Institutions worldwide choose to use (to the extent feasible) e-learning with its many Learning Management System (LMS) and other web-based systems. The United Nations (UN) and World Health Organisation (WHO) view online e-learning as a valuable instrument for satisfying educational requirements, particularly in developing countries(UN,2022; WHO, 2023). The shift to online education in response to the coronavirus pandemic posed new issues for instructors, students, and parents worldwide. While face-to-face education has traditionally been the favoured mode of instruction, remote learning is fast becoming the new norm today. However, many instructors, school systems, and families still struggle to adjust to their new e-learning settings. With a growing reliance on stable internet connections, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed significant connectivity issues in the Philippines and throughout the world.

For some, purchasing facilitative learning equipment may be challenging (Santos, 2020). Consistent with earlier studies, students often perceived internet accessibility as a barrier rather than a benefit in e-learning, particularly when connectivity is unstable (Almaiah et al., 2020; Cullinan et al., 2021; Rotas & Cahapay, 2020). For them, it is important that access is both timely and of high quality. They stressed that despite broad expansion of internet infrastructure, particularly in metropolitan regions of the Philippines, it's unsurprising that dependable internet access remains a long way off (Alvarez, 2020). When examining the hurdles to e-learning as indicated by the survey, it was discovered that insufficient and unpredictable internet access, insufficient computer laboratories, a shortage of computers, and technical difficulties were the most significant impediments to adapting to e-learning (Zalat et al., 2021).

Moreover, Cullinan et al. (2021) present evidence that students with less access to internet services may also be disadvantaged in terms of computer access for educational reasons. Some of the reasons why most institutions weren't ready for e-learning services were the lack of consistent internet connection across the Philippines and students' lack of access to internet facilities. Furthermore, poor internet infrastructure and load shedding continue to be major roadblocks to carrying out online activities of any significance (Islam, 2021). Some students assess their internet connection's quality as average to poor in a survey conducted on assessing distance learning in higher education (Elfirdoussi et al., 2020). Surprisingly, some students do not even have access to the internet (Elfirdoussi et al. 2020), and those from low-income backgrounds face particular challenges because of their lack of access to digital technologies. Students who may benefit from instructional technology are hampered by the digital divide (Fox, 2016). Students and their families suffer as a

result of such inequality. There is a digital gap in education, and students on the wrong side of it are not equipped for the high academic standards of the 21st century.

Despite attempts to make education more accessible to all, students who pursue remote education still face several hurdles. Numerous studies have been undertaken to document the stress (AlAteeq et al., 2020; Baloran, 2020) and other obstacles faced by students in their respective virtual learning spaces (Cullinan et al., 2021). While the digital divide in terms of internet connectivity is critical, there can also be gaps in terms of access to appropriate equipment or environment in which to work from home, or the digital literacy skills necessary to engage in online learning. For example, as compared to students from better socioeconomic level households, students from lower socioeconomic status families are less likely to have access to the internet, a computer, or a suitable learning environment (Lamb et al., 2020; Silva et al., 2018). Additionally, they are less likely to have well-developed information and communication technology abilities (Lee, 2017; Ortagus, 2017; Stich & Reeves, 2017 as cited by Cullinan, 2021).

The goal of this qualitative study was to find out the experiences of students at the North Eastern Mindanao State University Cantilan Campus whose online learning is often disrupted by poor connectivity. Further, it sought to investigate how difficult their encounters are and collect data on how the students deal with their struggles and challenges. It is necessary to study the students' issues and experiences of e-learning in order to develop an intervention strategy.

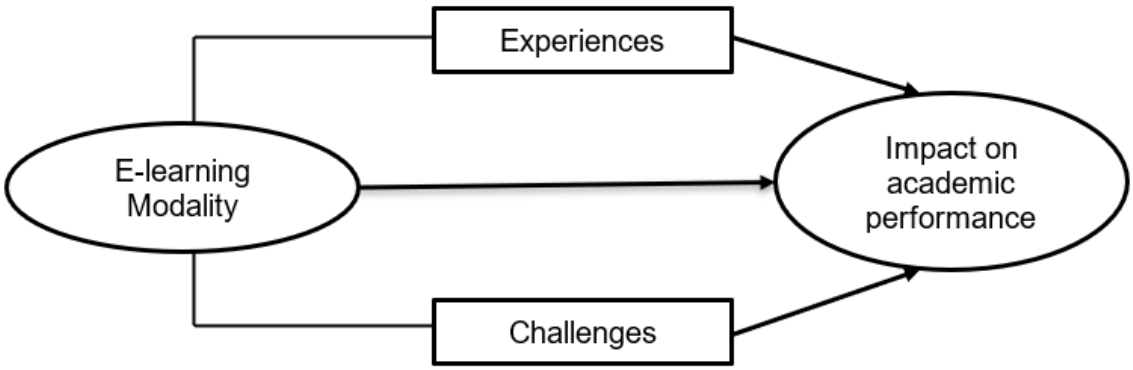

Figure 1. Conceptual Model

Research Questions

The main questions for the study were as follows:

1. What are the experiences of university students while on e-learning?

2. What are the challenges faced by the students and how do they overcome the problems?

3. What policies and interventions do students need?

Methodology

This study employed qualitative research methods in conjunction with a phenomenological research design to examine the lived experiences of struggling students while utilising e-learning during and since the COVID-19 pandemic. The phenomenological approach described the participants' interpretations of their experiences. This choice was influenced by Nacar and Camara (2021) and Tuffour (2017), who assert that the purpose of phenomenology is to convey the meaning of experience from the perspective of the experiencer – in terms of 'what' and 'how' the experiences occur. A semi-structured interview guide was also employed to gather data for the study with the goal of gaining an in-depth knowledge of the viewpoints of the participants.

Results and Findings

The sections that follow provide an analysis of data collected via semi-structured interviews, which were recorded and then transcribed. This research highlighted three primary themes:

1. The experiences of struggling students about e-learning;
2. The challenges of struggling students regarding e-learning; and
3. The impact of e-learning on students' academic performance.

Experiences of students on e-learning

Table 1. Individual experiences of the participants while on e-learning

Experience	Participant
Difficulty in coping the lesson	Participants 1, 5, 9
Poor Connectivity	Participants 2, 3
Stressful	Participant 4
Difficulty due to unavailable gadget	Participants 6, 7, 8

Adjustment issues have been one of the most prevalent participant replies. The majority encountered a rapid shift in the learning environment. Student 1 said,

> For me, face-to-face lectures are better than online learning, since I am unable to access sites and cannot often comprehend the lessons given in the Google Classroom.

Given the shift from face-to-face to online instruction, struggling students had difficulties adapting to the new norm. Student 4 described how he had to learn how to navigate each button inside the Google Classroom and Google Meet applications.

> Due to the sluggish signal, e-learning is not very effective. Occasionally, I am unable to connect to the platform.

Similarly, Student 5 mentioned having difficulty during the first weeks of online instruction.

> It is quite challenging, particularly in my programming subject. I don't have a laptop or android phone at home. I sometimes borrow from my relative.

She claimed that online learning doubled the stress of students. Other participants cited financial concerns as being one of their e-learning obstacles. Student 3 said,

> Since I do not own a smartphone, I am unable to attend online lessons since I cannot afford to visit an internet café.

Challenges of students with e-learning

Table 2. Challenges encountered by the participants during e-learning and how they overcome them

Challenge	Participant	Way to overcome
Poor connectivity	Participants 1, 2, 3, 9	Positive location; positive mind set
No hands-on activity	Participant 2	Positive mind set
Difficulty in sitting exams using phones	Participants 4, 5	Time management
No available device	Participants 6, 8	Borrowed gadget
Absence of IT skills and knowledge	Participants 7, 9	Time to learn online learning applications

These themes examine the difficulties experienced by participants as a result of e-learning. This also examines the participants' methods of overcoming obstacles and taking responsibility for their education. Internet connection constraints had the greatest frequency among the five themes indicated in Table 2, which was correlated with the participants' responses. They said that they were encountering challenges due to its restrictions and unavailability. They were acquainted with situations which made it difficult for them to attend synchronous classes and engage in online activities. Technology subjects and laboratory time cannot be taught via Zoom, Google Meet, or other video-streaming applications. Student 2 complained,

> Because we were unable to do hands-on troubleshooting, it is tough. We are just imagining the situation.

Student 4 claimed,

> It is difficult to answer the worksheets just by using my cell phone because I lack sufficient IT skills and knowledge.

Most participants discussed and exhibited tenacity despite the circumstances, enabling them to continue. The most effective and prevalent coping strategy was a positive mindset. With the aid of their optimistic outlook, they were able to overcome their obstacles. Information Technology Student 6 described how she managed the obstacles she faced by developing strategies to complete her academic requirements despite the challenges.

> I learned how to organise my time for homework so that I could complete all things without feeling unmotivated.

Impact of e-learning on academic performance

Table 3. Impact of online learning to their academic performance

Impact	Participants
Low grades/not good performance	Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 9
Failed in some subjects	Participants 5, 8
Dropped from class/ some subjects	Participants 7, 8
Confusion	Participant 6

Due to the aforementioned obstacles in e-learning, several students said that they failed certain courses and even dropped out of school. Others stated they received poor grades because of uncertainty. A Information Technology Student 6 said,

> During our midterm examinations, the internet connection abruptly went down, thus I was unable to complete my answers and received a very low score.

Likewise, Student 5 expressed the same sentiments: 'I even failed in my major subject.' Student 8 voiced the same thoughts on his unavailability of a personal smart phone.

> I could not access the Google Classroom lectures and exercises, therefore I dropped the class.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research has numerous implications for both teaching practice and future research. First, these results imply that course material may not easily transfer from a traditional classroom setting to an e-learning environment, since students' learning rate and techniques vary. Therefore, the material and teaching techniques of e-learning should be developed to facilitate students' learning while fitting their learning styles and preferences. Second, attempts should be made to eliminate the sense of alienation and tactics included for fostering interaction so that students can

have a sense of belonging. Before the commencement of the course, students should be encouraged and instructed on how to form virtual groups. As a future research focus, the development of best practices for promoting successful e-learning facilitation and forming virtual communities is noted. Third, as revealed by the students who participated in this research, learning results and satisfaction are usually achieved by an emphasis on clear content and high-quality learning resources, and not necessarily the use of advanced technology.

Recommendations

In this investigation into the lived reality of e-learning, we identified three primary motivations: asynchronous learning, support acquisition, and social engagement. While developing countries struggle to maintain quality and ongoing learning since the COVID-19 pandemic, stakeholders in higher education should also recognise that students have diverse requirements. Therefore, it is necessary to develop measures that promote relevant learning experiences. This is a chance for universities to examine the efficacy of various educational techniques and design their own hybrid models of teaching specific to their particular requirements. Families' input should be solicited in order to establish a beneficial learning environment for everybody. Long-term, the aforementioned measures will produce changes in the education delivery system, necessitating further testing, quality control, and regulation. To meet this need, the government should create regulatory agencies. Similarly, immediate modifications should be made to the present education budget to accommodate these educational reforms.

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