



Flexible Learning Engagements: Exploring the Lived Experiences of the Learners in the New Normal

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Abstract

With the threat of the COVID-19, the educational landscape shifted from the traditional face-to-face interaction to flexible learning where digital platforms and printed modules are used in instruction. The study was conducted on 10 students chosen through purposive sampling. Using a phenomenological design, the researchers conducted an interview to identify the lived experiences and the coping strategies of the students in the implementation of flexible learning at Quirino State University-Maddela Campus. In the new normal, themes such as safety measures, flexibility, limited access to technology, and support system emerged, according to the study. School administrators and instructors must be aware of the present scenario for students to be stress-free while completing their schooling.

Subject Areas

Social Sciences

Keywords

Coronavirus-19, Flexible Learning, Lived Experiences, New Normal

1. Introduction

Coronavirus-19 has had a significant impact on the world's educational scene. Due to the threat posed by the pandemic, all schools in the Philippines were postponed in March 2020. As schools and colleges around the world grapple with the effects of COVID-19, finding effective ways to continue delivering education has become a top priority, especially when face-to-face instruction is no longer permitted.

Government agencies, such as the Department of Education (DepEd) and the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), advocate online classes or flexible learning to address pandemic issues and the constraints imposed on schools to observe health protocols and practice social distancing. Thus, schools are now looking into the viability of implementing online classes or flexible learning [1].

Because there are no restrictions on time, place, or pace of study, flexible learning seems to be the most practical approach. Flexible Learning (FL) appears to be the most convenient instructional modality at the height of COVID-19. Although flexible learning is no longer a novel mode of instruction in higher education, past studies have revealed several obstacles. These include limited learners' readiness, the lack of variation in pedagogy, and the lack of empowerment in content development or merely teaching with predefined content. Furthermore, many universities and colleges are not equipped with infrastructure that facilitates online teaching, and students do not have access to computer hardware and internet services [2].

The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) has directed both public and private Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to use flexible learning to ensure that education continues. In response, Quirino State University created a Learning Continuity Plan (LCP) for AY 2020-2021 [3] to meet the needs of its students, which covers the framework and system of traditional modes of instruction to flexible learning integration while the declaration of a State of Public Health Emergency (Proclamation No.922). Distribution of printed modules to students with low internet connectivity, as well as the use of QSU e-ARAL as a modality in flexible learning, have been introduced and fully implemented to efficiently transform the education system.

Flexible learning's rapid adaption, on the other hand, has had an impact on the learning experiences and academic achievement of Quirino State University students who are the primary recipients of this modality. The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the learners' life experiences and how they coped with the new normal. Meanwhile, it seeks to address the following research questions: First, what are the experiences of the students in the implementation of flexible learning? And what strategies are used to cope with the new normal?

2. Research Methodology

A qualitative method specifically the phenomenology design was employed in the present study to explore the lived experiences of the learners on the implementation of flexible learning as an instructional modality in the new normal. Phenomenological research is looking at people's perceptions of the world through exploring the lived experience of a concept or a phenomenon from several individuals to interpret the common meaning [4]. In doing phenomenological research, it does not require getting inside someone's minds, instead, a researcher is supposed to meditate and theorize how things manifest and appear through and

in day-to-day living [5].

The study included 10 students enrolled in the second semester of Bachelor of Science in Technology and Livelihood Education and Bachelor of Science in Agriculture in 2020-2021. Purposive sampling was used to choose them. The students were informed about the study's goal and that the data would be utilized solely for academic and research purposes.

After the approval of the University officials in the conduct of the study, the participants were invited to participate voluntarily in an interview via messenger. The researchers set available dates and times for the participants to answer with their utmost honesty and sincerity. They were also informed that the interview was recorded for further procedures.

The semi-structured interview consisted of two-open ended questions focusing on their experiences on the implementation of flexible learning and on their coping strategies in the new normal. However, the interview was extended as additional information was elicited from the participants. Data saturation was achieved when the same information was obtained, and the participants could no longer give additional or different information.

After which, the transcripts were transcribed. The collected data were coded, and themes were produced. Participants were coded as follows: P1 ... P10 in which P stands for participant and the numeric 1 - 10 represents the number of the participants (Table 1).

Themes were identified by examining the initial codes, which led to constructing and organizing themes that are relevant to the present study [6] (Table 2).

3. Results and Discussion

The collected data in the interview that was done via the messenger were analyzed

Table 1. Sample initial coding.

Transcript	Initial Code
<p><i>"Hindi kami mahahawaan ng COVID-19 dahil hindi kami pumapasok sa paaralan"</i> (P1). (We won't be infected with COVID because we don't go to school).</p>	Not infected with COVID
<p><i>"Hina hati-hati ko ang aking oras upang gawin ang aking mga gawain sa bahay at pag may bakanteng oras sinasagutan ko ang aking activities and modules na ipinamahagi sa akin"</i> (P2). (I divide my time to do my housework and when I have a vacant time, I answer my activities in modules that are distributed to me).</p>	Can work and study
<p><i>"Nagpapatulong din ako sa mga bagay na hindi ko alam maging sa aking mga kamag-anak at kamag-ara"</i> (P10). (I'm trying to learn by myself every lesson, but I do what I only understand. I also ask for assistance from relatives and classmates).</p>	Ask assistance from classmates and relatives

Table 2. Summary of codes and themes.

Codes	Themes
Not infected with COVID Stay safe while at home Prevent the spread of virus	Safety measures
Can work and study Have part time job at daytime Can attend children's needs while studying	Flexibility
Can't afford to buy gadgets Experience slow signal Use mobile data No internet connection	Limited access to technology
Ask assistance from classmates and relatives Use Google to research Ask friends to explain lessons not understood	Support system

and classified according to themes. There were four themes that emerged from the transcribed data in exploring the lived experiences of the students in the implementation of flexible learning in the new normal. They include safety measures, flexibility, limited access to technology and a support system.

3.1. Lived Experiences

Theme 1: Safety Measures

In this time of the pandemic, there's nothing more to do than to practice safety measures. This can only be done by staying at home and going out only when needed. P1 and P8 continued their schooling at home without risking their health and safety. P1 added that it lowers the risk of being infected because they don't go to school.

This is illustrated in the statements that follow:

"May mga mabuting naidulot ang flexible learning gaya ng pagpapanatiling ligtas habang nanatili tayo sa loob ng ating bahay" (P8).

(There are good benefits of flexible learning like keeping us safe while staying at home).

"Hindi kami mahahawaan ng COVID-19 dahil hindi kami pumapasok sa paaralan" (P1).

(We won't be infected with COVID because we don't go to school).

According to CHED, HEIs shall limit the physical interaction of students and faculty in school premises by implementing continuity of inclusive education approach by use of appropriate modes of delivery [7]. Through the implementation of flexible learning, the learners are barred from going to school since face-to-face interaction is impossible. Education continues without risking the health of the students by adapting flexible learning which is one suitable teaching modality in this time of the pandemic.

The respondents' responses asserted that while flexible learning helps to improve

quality education, it also keeps the learner's mind in a happy state free of external worry, such as the hazards of COVID-19, which is a concern for everyone [8]. Additionally, flexible learning, which is often done at home, reduces other costs like transportation and meal expenses [9].

Theme II: Flexibility

The theme of flexibility takes part in the learning setup at this time of the pandemic. To illustrate, P6 does part-time jobs in the daytime and answers his activities in the module at night. In the same manner, P3 shared that, while looking after her children she can still manage to answer her modules to graduate. It is also noted P3 makes a schedule plan to divide his time wisely-finish schoolwork during her spare time. These are the statements of the participants:

“Sa umaga nag tratabaho ako at sa gabi naman ay nilalaanan ko ng oras ang pagsagot sa aking mga activities” (P6).

(In the morning I work and at night, I take time to answer my activities).

“Kahit mahirap pagsabayin ang pag-aaral sa pagiging ina nabigyan ako ng pagakakataong mag-aral habang nag-aalaga ako ng aking mga anak. Oo, mahirap isabay ang pagsagot ng mga module habang may makulit na mga anak pero para sa kagustuhan kong makapagtapos sa aking pag-aaral kakayanin ko ito” (P3).

(Although it's not easy to answer the modules while looking after my children, I can do it because I want to graduate).

“Hina hati-hati ko ang aking oras upang gawin ang aking mga gawain sa bahay at pag may bakanteng oras sinasagutan ko ang aking activities and modules na ipinamahagi sa akin” (P2).

(I divide my time to do my housework and when I have a vacant time, I answer my activities in modules that are distributed to me).

The students can effectively manage their time to attend to their flexible learning as well as their other responsibilities at home and work. The present study is anchored on the Flexible pedagogy: Technology-enhanced learning [10] [11], which emphasized that flexible learning lets students choose when, where and how to learn. This is referred to as the learning pace, place and mode.

The present study revealed that this modality of learning allows learners to perform responsibilities at home and other part-time jobs while learning. Flexible learning has become an advantage to some students who have part time jobs and at the same time to student-parents who have children's needs to attend to. The respondents' responses have found assertion [12] which supports the current study as they claimed that distance-learning or flexible learning is more preferred by university students who have part-time jobs and adult learners. In contrast, [13] mentioned domestic category as one of the barriers in flexible learning.

Theme III. Limited Access to Technology

Another theme that emerged is the limited access to technology. This was experienced by P5. He even shared that he can't afford to buy these gadgets. He added that there were times that he didn't attend his classes due to a shortage of money to buy a load to sustain his online class. The findings imply a dropout alarm since students experience challenges in terms of technology use.

“Unang-una ay ang kawalan ng kakayahang makabili ng mga kagamitang gagamitin sa flexible learning katulad ng cellphone, laptop, at ano pa mang gadgets kabilang narin ng pag-kakaroon ng malakas na internet connection. Dahil wala kaming gadgets at mahina pa ang signal, hindi na kami nag-aattend ng klase. Wala din kasi kaming pambili ng load” (P5).

(First is the inability to buy flexible learning tools such as cellphones, laptops, and any other gadgets including the availability of powerful internet connections. Because of the lack of gadgets and poor signal, I did not attend my class. I don't also have money to buy load).

Most of the students now a day belong to generation Z who are adoptive and users of technology. They are up to date on all of life's latest developments because most of them own smartphones or laptop computers. However, not all Quirino State University students appreciate the wonders of technology. Slow internet access affects remote barangays in Maddela and Nagtipunan, where the majority of students reside. This causes issues in their synchronous class and even in QSU eARAL's activities. Another issue is the lack of technology, such as mobile phones and computers, which are required to access the LMS.

Although, many educational institutions want to participate in this technology-driven education, they face several obstacles such as the use of technology [14]. According to [1], the respondents of their study use mobile data as their source of internet connection, a flexible learning scheme that would have low usage of mobile data to lessen the students' expenses, and offline class or use of modules or learning materials should also be an option for those students who don't have connectivity. Moreover, [15] posited that some of his participants had the notion that the use of technology in teaching and learning becomes a hindrance or a barrier for the teachers to deliver their instruction, considering the need to use an LMS. This becomes problematic, and it is seen to be technical; thus, it results in difficulty and confusion on instructional design and development.

3.2. Coping Mechanism

Theme IV: Support System

Lastly, a support system is also worth mentioning as one of the coping mechanisms that the students do in these trying times. P10 explained that while flexible learning has encouraged self-learning to new concepts and ideas in understanding lessons, he also seeks assistance from fellow students, and relatives to lessen the difficulty of the current learning setup.

This theme is shown in the statement below:

“Dahil sa flexible learning, natuturuan kaming maging independent. Pinipilit kong aralin ng sa sarili ko lamang ang bawat leksyon ngunit kung ano lamang ang aking naintindihan ay yun lamang ang aking gagawin. Nagpapatulong din ako sa mga bagay na hindi ko alam maging sa aking mga kamag-anak at kamag-ara” (P10).

(I'm trying to learn by myself every lesson, but I do what I only understand. I

also ask for assistance from relatives and classmates).

The finding suggests that students gain their support system not only through face-to-face interaction but also virtually which enables them to socialize with their friends and classmates online. Although flexible learning as an instructional modality teaches autonomy in terms of environmental attitudes towards flexible learning, it does not only boost authentic learning, active learning, but also student autonomy. However, there are times that the students need to interact with other people to fully gain knowledge [2].

Similar to the present study, it is important to manage the student's responsibilities ahead of time to fulfill all the tasks that need to be performed. In addition, they adapt to challenges during online classes by seeking out their fellow students. These online classes enable students to do activities to make them know each other even without face-to-face classes [16].

4. Conclusion and Future Works

On top of the threat of COVID-19, flexible learning is implemented in Quirino State University as an alternative to face-to-face interaction. Studying at home promotes self-learning and flexibility since students may manage their time independently. Flexible learning allows students to complete things at their own pace. Students can also continue their education without jeopardizing their health or safety. The limited access to technology, on the other hand, signals the need to recognize that not all of them are equipped with the devices that are essential in flexible learning. The findings show that as students participate in flexible learning, they face a variety of challenges along the way that shape their educational capability in the new normal.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made based on the findings and conclusion of the study:

- 1) The students are not to stress themselves on the grade they achieve on this kind of modality;
- 2) The instructors are to be considerate to their students;
- 3) The instructors are to lessen the activities for students to handle workloads on time;
- 4) The future researcher is to further the studies on the lived experiences of students at this time of the pandemic.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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