Lived experiences of teachers and students in distance education: shift from traditional to online learning

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Abstract. The shift from the traditional way of teaching to distance learning has led many institutions to transition to online learning, which is considered the most effective method for delivering curriculum content to students. Research on distance education shows promise, but it also reveals certain drawbacks. Consequently, improving the promotion of distance education in each institution presents a challenge. This research aims to address two key questions: (a) What are the developmental issues faced by instructors and students when transitioning from traditional to online learning? (b) What potential effects could these problems have on instructors and students' performance? Thematic analysis was employed to identify essential concepts related to information necessary for understanding online and distance learning. This analysis revealed the emergence of the "MAP" of distance learning, encompassing three distinct themes derived from the six main questions in the researcher's interview guide. "MAP" refers to the methodologies employed by different institutions during the teaching and learning shift, the alternative platforms used to deliver curriculum content, and the encountered problems. It is essential for institutions to be well-informed about these problems to effectively address them.

Keywords: distance education, technology, lived experiences, traditional teaching and learning

1. Introduction

In the annals of education, the prevailing model of learning once revolved around the traditional classroom, where students gathered physically, and educators imparted knowledge through face-to-face interactions. However, the tides of time have ushered in an era of transformative change, propelled by the rapid advancement of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). These innovations have catalyzed a profound evolution in the educational landscape, reshaping conventional norms and giving rise to a new paradigm: online learning [3, 18].

As we stand in the midst of this contemporary epoch, the imprint of technology's influence on education is unmistakable. The conventional confines of geographical proximity and temporal constraints are being redefined by the power of computers and the Internet [9, 10, 47]. In this dynamic milieu, education is shedding its traditional shackles, embracing a flexible learning ethos that allows learners to transcend the limitations of physical presence and engage with knowledge from the comfort of their homes. The once-static classroom is being complemented, and in some cases supplanted, by the virtual realm of online courses [2, 38].

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Amidst this monumental shift, the world found itself engulfed in the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic, an unprecedented crisis that dramatically altered the landscape of education. Social distancing measures and lockdowns necessitated the closure of physical classrooms, prompting a rapid acceleration towards online and distance learning modalities [23, 26]. The pandemic became a catalyst that intensified the ongoing digital transformation of education. In response to the imperative of ensuring continuity in learning, educators and institutions had to innovate swiftly, leveraging digital tools and platforms to bridge the physical divide imposed by the virus. The immediacy of the situation forced a reevaluation of teaching methodologies, requiring educators to explore creative ways to engage students remotely, maintain academic rigor, and provide necessary support [17, 35].

While the adoption of online learning during the pandemic was born out of necessity, it also shed light on the immense potential of digital education. It underscored the importance of not only overcoming immediate challenges but also understanding the long-term implications of this shift. The pandemic-induced reliance on online learning further accentuated the significance of addressing issues related to digital accessibility, equitable access to technology, and ensuring that no student was left behind in the digital divide [23, 26].

As the majority of education, particularly in the realm of distance learning, gravitated towards the digital realm amidst the pandemic, the Internet became the conduit for the dissemination of learning materials, the facilitator of teacher-student connections, and the avenue for fostering peer collaboration [46, 47]. Open and distance learning, once a niche concept, became a burgeoning movement that harnessed the Internet's expansive reach to democratize access to knowledge, transcending geographical boundaries [5, 6].

The transformation did not merely rest on the shoulders of technology; it was driven by the very essence of pedagogical evolution. Learning Management Systems (LMS) and Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) emerged as the modern-day equivalents of the traditional classroom. They empowered learners with the agency to navigate their educational journeys at their own pace, while educators crafted learning experiences that transcended temporal and spatial confines [37]. This shift wasn't just about changing platforms; it was about altering the very fabric of education, putting the learner at the helm and enabling the tailoring of education to individual needs [53].

The impact of online learning, accentuated by the challenges posed by the pandemic, reverberated beyond mere convenience; it touched upon the very essence of the learning experience. Online platforms metamorphosed into vibrant ecosystems where multimedia content engaged learners in diverse ways, fostering not just absorption but active participation and exploration [51]. The journey from a passive recipient to a proactive seeker of knowledge mirrored a broader shift towards individualized learning, cultivating self-directed learners who embraced education as a lifelong pursuit [36, 47].

Yet, amidst the promise and potential of online education, challenges emerged, magnified by the exigencies of the pandemic. Technical glitches, the nuanced art of remote communication, and the provision of timely feedback became areas demanding scrutiny [39, 40, 43]. As education metamorphosed, it became imperative to address these hurdles and pave the way for a seamless transition, ensuring that the promise of online learning was fully realized [50].

In the Philippine context, the resonance of online learning became profound, especially in the crucible of the pandemic. The realm of distance education, once a nascent venture, thrived

with e-learning courses as a paramount mode of learning. Universities embraced the digital tide, integrating platforms like Schoology and Google Classroom into their educational repertoire. While challenges persisted, the drive to democratize education and enhance literacy remained a potent catalyst [2, 5].

In this crucible of transformative change, the research aimed to unveil the complexities woven into the tapestry of the shift from traditional to online learning, particularly during the crucible of the pandemic. By delving into these intricacies, the study aspired to not just identify challenges but illuminate pathways to enhance education's quality and resilience, as educators and learners navigated the dynamic landscape of modern education [4, 31, 52]. The pandemic, while presenting formidable challenges, also became a catalyst for innovation, pushing the boundaries of what education could achieve in the digital realm. Through rigorous examination and thoughtful analysis, this research sought to contribute valuable insights that could shape the future of education, ensuring it remained adaptive, inclusive, and robust in the face of uncertainties.

2. Methodology

2.1. Design

This study used a qualitative approach with phenomenology as its design. Phenomenological research is used to investigate a phenomenon from the experience of those closest to the issue [15]. This study aims to explore the phenomenon on the factors and challenges faced by students and teachers in a distance education course. The phenomenological design was chosen since phenomenological research seeks answers to research questions in a descriptive manner through interviews or observation of those closest to the phenomenon [15]. To answer the research problems, teachers and the students served as the key informants. Their answers were collaborated to further analysis. In addition, a phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their shared experiences of a concept or a phenomenon and the phenomenon that was studied in this research was the shift from traditional teaching and learning to online learning due to the pandemic [12]. The concentration is toward illuminating details and seemingly trivial aspects within experience that may be taken for granted in the lives of the key informants, with a goal of creating meaning and achieving a sense of understanding [55]. Specifically, this research will conduct triangulation. According to Creswell and Miller [13], triangulation is defined as "a validity procedure where researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study". The triangulation in this research includes interview of teachers and through focus group discussion (FGD) with students in messenger since it is the most convenient way

2.2. Participants and settings

The participants in this research are the teachers (10) in the secondary level and universities and students (30) in the college and high school. Those who were able to contact by the researcher and those who accepted to be part of this research were the respondents of this research since

one problem here is the internet connection of some respondents. The participants were all from Baguio City.

2.3. Data gathering materials

First, an Aide Memoire will be use for the interview of the key informants. A set of interview questions were formulated to answer the presented problems. The formulated questions were based on A Priori Code. Working definitions was presented as well as the formulated questions about the given codes. Related questions were asked to the teacher about the challenges they are facing in an online teaching and as well as to students. Open – ended questions were formulated to allow a wide range of responses with no preconceived response possible. Also, follow – up questions were used to ensure saturation of information especially that the study is based on lived experiences of the participants.

For the interview, the researcher has used messenger (video and call) and email and at the same time forwarded questionnaires to participants who are not able to answer the call. Lastly, data analysis will be done to complete the triangulation.

2.4. Data gathering procedure

Prior to the interview, a letter were sent to the participants. Those who replied to agree in the research were the one who went through the research. The time for data gathering with the means of messenger and email was set according to the free time of the respondents. The interviewer was guided by an Aide Memoire to ensure that all questions were raised during the interview. The interview must last at a required time to ensure that all the information will grasp and delivered during the interview.

The researcher conducted an interview which is more structured than the informal conversational interview although it is still flexible in its composition [22]. The ways that questions are potentially worded depend upon the researcher who is conducting the interview. The respondents may not consistently answer the same question(s) based on how they were posed by the interviewer [34]. The point of a qualitative interview is to let the respondents tell their own story on their own terms.

2.5. Ethical considerations

Letters requesting permission was sent to the participants. All the procedures and the result of this research was channeled and reported to the participants as part of ethics in research.

2.6. Establishing trustworthiness and rigor of data

To establish the trustworthiness and the rigor of the data gathered, the researcher conducted an audit train and member – checking. This is because the key informants themselves need to ensure that no misinterpretation of their views and comments was done [11]. An audit train was presented to the key informants as a transparent description of the steps that will be taken from the start of the research to the development and reporting of problem. This means that

the researcher conducted follow – ups for the key informants to be able to correct inaccuracies, validate, and confirm the data already gathered.

2.7. Mode of analysis

After the interview, answers to each question were transcribed for analysis. Some were only sent through email directly answered in the interview guide. Words and terms in the interview expressed in the vernacular language was translated in English. The transcribed data was validated by the key informants for clarity and accuracy. Cool and warm analysis will be done to formulate themes from the given answers of the participants. Boyatzis [8] describes thematic analysis as a process of encoding qualitative information where the researcher develops codes, words or phrases that serve as labels for sections of data. Basically, thematic approach is "identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data". Thematic analysis was the most appropriate mode of analysis since it is more flexible and allows easier communication of findings, interpretation of meanings and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. It minimally organizes and describes the data set in detail. Thematic analysis in its simplest form is a categorizing strategy for qualitative data. A researcher reviews data makes notes and begins to sort them into categories; thus, the researcher develops "codes", words or phrases that serve as labels for sections of data [8].

3. Results and discussion

The process of thematic analysis led to the identification of the key concepts regarding the information needed and should be understood in terms of online or distance learning. After a careful analysis, the **MAP** of distance learning have emerged which were three distinct themes from the six main questions from the interview guide used by the researcher. **MAP** means **methodologies applied** by the different institutions during the shift of teaching and learning, **alternative platforms** used to deliver the content of the curriculum to students and **problems encountered** in which the institutions should well be informed with in order to take action to these problems. The following are the discussions regarding the theme that were constructed.

3.1. Methodologies applied during the pandemic

The global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has induced significant transformations across industries and educational systems worldwide, including in the Philippines. The conventional methods of teaching and learning underwent a swift transition to distance education, necessitating institutions to adopt online platforms as the most effective means of delivering curriculum content to students.

In the context of this research, participants were queried about their respective institutions' response to the pandemic and how they managed to disseminate curriculum content during this challenging period. Notably, all participants cited a shift to alternative modes of education delivery, primarily embracing distance education. This sudden transition prompted institutions to rethink their strategies, enabling students to continue their education without disruption [5, 6].

Teacher responses revealed various proactive measures taken to facilitate learning in the virtual realm. Schools devised output-based plans, requiring teachers to generate learning aids like lecture notes and presentations.

> *"Our school crafted an output-based plans and teachers are expected to create learning aids such as lecture notes, presentations and other materials targeting the core each subject thus trimming the academic load of students during the pandemic."*

> *"Sending of handouts, lectures through videos and educational links to students with giving of enhancement learning and formative assessments."*

These resources were specifically designed to streamline the academic workload, mitigating challenges faced by students during the pandemic. Additionally, educators employed digital mediums such as handouts, video lectures, and educational links to impart knowledge and assess student progress.

The prevailing shift towards distance education was substantiated by the utilization of diverse platforms. Institutions embraced Alternative Delivery Modes (ADM) encompassing online and offline methods. Online avenues included Learning Management Systems (LMS) like Genyo, social media platforms, SMS (text messaging), and phone calls. This multipronged approach aimed to accommodate various student needs and technological accessibilities.

Corroborating the educators' insights, students also shared their perspectives on the transition. They reported the receipt of notes and activities via online learning platforms, compensating for the absence of traditional face-to-face classes and consultations. Assessments were adjusted to accommodate longer time frames, contributing to a more flexible learning environment.

These technological advancements underscore a fundamental paradigm shift in education, transcending the confines of physical classrooms. Learners are empowered to engage with educational content at their own pace, regardless of geographical or temporal constraints [19]. The overarching goal remains to promote active learning through a spectrum of activities, experiences, and connections.

The necessity for virtual education delivery in times of crisis is underscored by the increasing prevalence of open and distance learning methodologies. This approach, propelled by the internet's widespread accessibility, fosters enhanced learning opportunities within formal educational contexts. It's evident that integrating information technology in education has gained momentum, suggesting that online education will eventually become an integral aspect of school-based learning [38].

The subsequent theme delves into the platforms harnessed by both educators and students to facilitate learning, demonstrating their adaptability and resilience amid the pandemic's constraints.

3.2. Alternative platforms

It is very important that institutions led by administrators to be ready in terms of online resiliency through different platforms to be used by the teachers in order for them to deliver the content of the curriculum. As *Philippine Education for All 2015 review report* [41] stated that teachers and institutions should discover different ways to make learning stronger and to think

of a system to take action for the continuing learning of students. Therefore, revolution on how to deal with teaching and learning is what all the institutions need in order to promote their vision and mission even the pandemic has lock down all schools physically but not virtually. In response to significant demand, many online learning are offering free access to their services. The Learning Management System (LMS) and Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) have become increasingly common in schools. Online learning platforms has had a hugely positive impact on the way we experience education. Online platforms are types of learning management (LMS systems) that provide users with access to digital classes. These virtual courses are similar to offline classes in a lot of ways: an instructor provides an engaging educational experience, and PDF files or sometimes link to websites where learners need to go in order to understand a certain topic through video, image, or text. This has seen on the different answers of the respondents in the interview questions.

> *"Our school intended to maximize the use of the different social media apps like facebook and messenger to be able to send our learning notes and activities while some used websites and google classrooms."*

> *"We address the situation through the use of Alternative Delivery Mode (ADM): online and offline. For online, it is through the use of our school's Learning Management System (LMS) called Genyo and social media platforms, and for offline, it is through SMS (text messaging) and phone call."*

Some online platforms that were used were Genyo from a private institution that provides rich and engaging multimedia content for the students; Google Classroom which is a free web service developed by Google to simplify creating, distributing and grading assignments in paperless way; Schoology provides social networking service and virtual learning environment that allows users to create, manage and share academic content; Quipper which is an education technology company that provides e-learning through coaching, tutoring and giving different assessments that teachers could use in their subjects; DepEd Commons (Department of Education Commons) is a free access site where students could learn even without internet connection through their smartphones or tablets; Canva for diagram and infographics; Edmodo network enables teachers to share content, distribute quizzes and assignments, manage communication with students and parents and zoom for video communications.

Social networking sites (SNS) are not only for leisure but they are also being use as a platform to communicate with the students. SNS might be re-envisioned as support for student learning outcomes like providing peer support and SNS can stimulate social and civic benefits, online and offline thanks to the widening of the context of learning and the mixing of information and learning resources [24, 32].

> *"They just send notes and requirements through different means. Some use Student Portals, others use Google Classroom, and others use Messenger Groups, and some Facebook Groups because these are some of those SNS that are accessible."*

It is seen above that SNS were creatively used by learners and teachers to promote teaching and learning. Facebook is one of the most used SNS in the world since it has a complete package

where everyone could share their ideas through messenger (chatting or video conferencing) [33]. Facebook has been focused on the opinions and attitudes that academic institutions, learners and teachers express towards its usage as an educational tool and learning environment [7, 21, 45, 48].

Online platforms were not only used to deliver the content of the curriculum but also offline platforms which pertains to pdf, power points, notes for lectures and modules like ADM (alternative delivery mode – same like modules but more on a shorter version) which were also use in the traditional way of teaching, The only difference is that they were send online through the different means just to communicate with the students. With all the answers of the students and teachers, all of them have used different platforms where no one is left behind in their learning in this problem.

3.3. Problems encountered

The rapid spread of distance education in the world not only offers learners and teachers great opportunity but also brings a lot of challenges [38]. While online practices becomes so widespread and popular, they are known to have drawbacks as well. These problems are seen in the answers of the students and teachers in the interview which the sample excerpt is presented below.

> *"Problems encountered is mainly related to relay of information or the dissemination of announcements – of keeping focused despite the overwhelming information from the internet."*

> *"I have also encountered problems with connectivity. I only rely on mobile data to connect to the internet. With the ECQ, it makes it harder to connect as it is not easy to access loading stations when needed. Despite having connection through mobile data, this does not guarantee that I will be able to access the notes and requirements, as well as research what I need to, due to unreliable signal and unconductive environment."*

> *"I don't understand really the topics because I'm into face to face learning where my teacher explains every topic."*

> *"As a student, it is hard to focus since there are so many distractions when learning from the comfort of your own home. Compared to a classroom, where you must pay attention and listen since that is the only thing you can do there."*

The answers above shows some problems related to distance learning that institutions as well as teachers should address. In some answers, almost all students have mentioned about their learning styles and almost all of them need the support of feedback by the teachers regarding the activities given to them and the lessons they need to study. With this, the theory of distance which is grounded by the three approaches in education that are important which are the Theory of Autonomy and Independence, Theory of Industrialization and Theory of Interaction and Communication were not been totally observe. The Theory of Interaction which is all on communication is somewhat the problem in promoting distance education. If teachers wants

to promote learning to students then they must communicate and give feedbacks to construct knowledge and help students to learn more regarding the subject matter [14, 44]. Another problem arising from not giving feedbacks is that it affects the autonomy and independence of the students to learn [27]. Teachers should guide their students in all the lessons because of the transition that affects everyone. Teachers should consider also the different learning styles of students [47, 54]. Not all students are the same. Additional thing to be considered when doing distance learning are assessments. The requirement to provide timely formative tasks that are designed to facilitate student learning and autonomy has provoked a wider examination of the role of assessment and encouraged teachers to promote assessment in alignment with the curriculum design framework [14]. With the case of distance education, assessments should be suitable to the level of the students and must be given ample time to finish it. Teachers must consider this since student learning outcomes maybe significantly improved through the provision of formative assessments that are coupled with timely feedback [30]. Student learning and development could be improved by designing and implementing various instructional environment and practices. Different researches have agreed that students's engagement with academically purposeful activities is one of the important factors for student learning and personal development in traditional and technology enhanced learning environment [16, 20]. If these could be implemented, student's engagement and motivation could be increasingly develop, thus promoting effective teaching and learning.

Another problem that institutions and teachers should oversee is the mental health of evry student. Mental health is one cause of distractions among students on effective teaching and learning. This is seen on some of the answers of the students.

> *"As a student, I have mental health problems and a weak immune system, 'learning' is literally the last thing I would think of doing when there are reports of people dying due to a virus all around the world. These conditions prevent me from actually doing my requirements. I really want to make progress but I am having a hard time convincing myself, despite taking in medications and therapy."*

Learners' needs include different learning styles which can influence learning performance as mentioned earlier. In addition, in this time of pandemic and uncertainties, educators should think also that we should develop our students not only cognitively but holistically developed in terms of emotional intelligence (EI). Teachers have a great role in maintaining a healthy learning environment to students because teachers' personal skills, and personality characteristics which facilitate teacher student relationship and contribute to students' adjustment in school is very essential [42]. Knowing the cases of each student, asking how they are is a big help and promotes peer support, thus students' motivation and physical and emotional wellbeing might be lift.

The discussion above could be summed into drawbacks such as: technical problems that can arise in online learning [1, 29, 49], inability to meet the learning needs at learner's own speed [25], lack of communication among learners and between learners and teachers [1, 19], lack of quality materials appropriate for online learning or the undated inclusion of the materials used in traditional methods directly into online learning [25], difficulties in feedback [28, 29, 47].

With all the problems and drawbacks that were experienced during the shift from traditional to online learning, institutions as well as teachers should be informed and make a way to

address these issues in order to have a successful teaching and learning. Teachers have the responsibility to think of strategies like activities to engage learners in the discussion and activities presented online. It is a challenge to improve the way each institution promote distance education. Universities, colleges as well as different secondary schools are responding to these changing expectations like looking for support to their burgeoning online learning as well as backing up this through trainings of faculties to become skilled online instructors that produces quality assured materials and assessments online. It is a step by step process where everyone is involve in this kind of transition.

4. Conclusion

The transition from traditional education to distance education represents a pivotal juncture for many educational institutions, particularly for both educators and students. While research on distance education holds promise, it also reveals certain drawbacks that must be addressed, presenting a challenge in enhancing the implementation of this new educational paradigm.

In this context, the evolution towards effective distance education becomes a multifaceted task. Teachers shoulder the responsibility of devising strategies that stimulate engagement and interaction among learners within the online sphere. Given the self-directed nature of distance education, learners often navigate their academic journey independently with the aid of technological devices such as computers, laptops, and tablets. As a consequence, limited interaction with peers and instructors calls for optimized use of any allocated interaction time. Teachers play a pivotal role in fostering a conducive learning environment by facilitating clarifications and providing constructive feedback during these interactions.

The MAP approach serves as a guiding compass, equipping institutions that have embarked on this abrupt shift with a structured framework for enhancing their distance education programs. This roadmap facilitates a comprehensive approach to refining the nascent educational landscape. Integral to this endeavor is the conscientious consideration of various influencing factors that wield the potential to shape the success of distance education initiatives. The training and development of educators is paramount, ensuring they possess the requisite skills and methodologies to navigate the intricacies of online instruction effectively.

Beyond pedagogical prowess, attention must be directed towards nurturing the mental well-being of students. This transition can be isolating, underscoring the need for support mechanisms that address students' emotional and psychological needs. Additionally, judicious platform selection is crucial; an array of online tools may inadvertently dilute students' focus as they acclimate to novel learning environments.

The transformation is a phased progression, wherein all stakeholders play an integral role. The concerted effort to ensure a seamless transition must encapsulate collaborative strategies that foster mutual adaptation and growth. By embracing this shift as a collective journey, educational institutions can leverage it as an opportunity to propel the evolution of teaching and learning methodologies. Ultimately, the successful implementation of distance education hinges on an unwavering commitment to innovation, engagement, and holistic support, engendering a new era of inclusive and dynamic education for all.

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