*Research Article*

# Living in the digital world: A transcendental phenomenological study of the students' experiences in virtual learning

Bernardo K. Gumarang Jr.
*Isabela State University Cabagan Campus, PHILIPPINES*
nardkindipan27@gmail.com

| ARTICLEINFO | ABSTRACT | E-ISSN: 2961-3809 |
|---|---|---|

The new mode of teaching and learning during this pandemic is indeed a challenge that brought so many changes in the academe. Students normally attend school face to face with their classmates but due to the coronavirus, most universities around the globe chose to lock down and adopted distance education. This transcendental phenomenological study explored the experiences of students, specifically the challenges encountered in virtual learning. The researcher invited five students and they were interviewed through a semi-structured questionnaire. Colaizzi's method of analysis was used to analyze the data gathered. This study revealed six themes which are, *Poor Internet Connectivity, Poor Understanding, Financial Difficulty, Poor Location for Learning, an Unorganized Schedule for Virtual Meetings, and the Use of Multiple Online Learning platforms*. It is indeed that students are not easily able to cope with the problems since they are not prepared for this situation. This study recommended that the national government and the sector of educators must take all actions to cater to the needs of the students especially by providing for their needs while adopting the new mode of learning. This study also suggested that future researchers have a deep exploration of the lived experiences of students amidst the pandemic, to explore their challenges and coping mechanisms.

## INTRODUCTION

Education has undergone significant changes particularly as a result of technological advancements (Dela Fuente, 2021). Classical universities and colleges have been pushed to use alternate instructional delivery techniques as a result of the internet's as well as other new technologies' breakthroughs. Innovative approaches continue to have an impact on how instructors teach and students learn. Synchronous online classes are one distribution option that is gaining popularity. Synchronous remote teaching is one of the most common types of distance education, and it has a variety of benefits for both educators and students. Nevertheless, it's also vital to be aware of some of the difficulties and challenges that come with this method of learning. As the academe pursue teaching and learning, an unexpected case happened where humanity is facing a dramatic battle with the Covid-19 virus.

The Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) had a devastating impact on the entire world. COVID-19 was first discovered in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, a city with a population of 11 million citizens. Within only three months, it has expanded to 188 countries across the globe, infecting over a million people and killing over 11,000 people (World Health Organization, 2020). COVID-19 is incredibly aggressive, which is why it spreads so quickly. Some governments, including India, Malaysia, Canada, Singapore, and even the Philippines and many more countries have implemented partial or complete shutdowns to stop the spread. It has undoubtedly brought nearly all commercial, business, and non-commercial, as well as governmental activities to a stop on a global scale. Whereas airline travel, leisure, amusement, and ride-sharing have all but ceased, the internet gaming sector, online grocery delivery, and, most significantly, remote education (synchronous and asynchronous instructions) continue to operate normally (Ramadan, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has forced academic institutions to adjust to its limitations (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020; Neil, 2020). Several applications and platforms such as the use of Edmodo google meet, zoom, Facebook messenger, and other educational resources have been initiated to assist high school and college students, professors and teachers, parents, academic institutions, and educational leaders in their study processes, as well as to provide support networks and facilitate interaction during the shutdown of the academic system (Dela Fuente, 2019; Reimers, et al. 2020; Bender, 2020). Classes online were originally developed in the framework of a teacher/professor presenting material in a class, with the knowledge being transferred and stored via computer so that students may retrieve it later and again.

Students appear to prefer this format since it allows them to have quick access to information. Undergraduate students, on the other hand, are much more traditional, which is why they dislike the structure of online classes, as opposed to postgraduate students, who are even more flexible to contemporary work techniques in the learning setting and prefer collaborative approaches and direct connection inside the university (Castaneda & Rentz, 2020; Dela Fuente & Biñas, 2020). Students must be more disciplined when taking online classes. Graduate students have higher chances of success in distance learning because of higher maturation and professionalism, whereas undergraduates are less engaged in this approach, and middle school students are considerably less disposed to online classes (Dela Fuente, 2021; UNESCO, 2020). Students who value involvement in classroom teaching courses believe it is necessary to engage with academics for face-to-face interactions with professors and classmates, including for instant feedback provided by the mentioned circumstances (Mather & Sarkans, 2018). As a result, students perceive online classes as unproductive because of the consequences of online learning, which include minimal exposure to the school setting and classmates, as well as increased contact with online devices (Berondo & Dela Fuente, 2021; Gabor, 2020). This is the very reason why the researcher conducted this study to explore the experiences of University Students in the Synchronous Online Learning approach for further development of this method and address the problems and needs of the students during the pandemic.

## METHODS

This study used transcendental phenomenology as its research design. This technique is commonly used in social science research to investigate and describe people's lived experiences. The participants were selected using the criteria established by the researcher. To select study participants, the researcher established inclusion and exclusion criteria. The study's respondents are five (5) college students from one of the universities in the Philippines. The study was conducted using interviews as the primary data collection tool. The study used a semi-structured interview, which included multiple important questions that helped to define the areas to be studied while also allowing the interviewer and interviewee to deviate to investigate a thought or response in greater detail. Before the study began, the researcher distributed a permission letter, which was agreed to sign by the respondents. The study's interview guide was also confirmed by research experts, and pilot testing was carried out before the proper conduct of the interview. The researcher audio-documented the interview with the respondents' approval to create written transcripts. There were also follow-up questions asked via the messenger application. The Seven Steps in Colaizzi's methods of analysis were performed by the researcher in identifying themes as used by Dela Fuente (2021).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This the chapter shows the different themes generated from the analysis of the transcribed interview of the respondents.

*Poor internet connectivity*

Students are struggling in making adjustments to a virtual learning environment since they are exposed to classroom learning or face-to-face learning approach. They are unable to respond to commuter-based education due to the abrupt change. In an online platform of learning, there is a need for a strong connection for the students to connect virtually in online discussions with their teachers. Unfortunately, students are struggling on this part since they are experiencing poor connection in their synchronous meetings with their teachers. Some of the participants described that due to their location they are not able to connect, and also because of power interruptions as well as poor signal. These problems experienced by the participants gave so much burden on their synchronous meetings in online education during this pandemic. Andrea shared that she is not able to connect in synchronous meetings due to connection difficulty. She said:

> *"I cannot join sometimes in our virtual discussion due weak connection, I don't know what to do because we don't have Wi-Fi in our house, and I only depend on mobile data"*

Jake described his experience in virtual discussion. He said:
> *"Sometimes I cannot connect in Google meet or our synchronous meeting sir. I am not able to cope in virtual discussion due to poor signal sir"*

Joshua also expressed his struggles in attending the synchronous meeting during this pandemic. He said:

> *"I am living in an area where the connection is poor sir. I want to get a module but the university encourages us to still attend in synchronous discussion"*

He added:

> *"I can attend for a while like 2 to 3 minutes but after that, I encounter a problem in my connection"*

Princess shared that for her to attend their synchronous meeting she has to look for a mall for her to be connected virtually yet she still experienced poor connection. She said:

> *"I am far away in signal tower sir...during the synchronous meeting we are mandated to attend...I cannot connect easily due to loss of connection now and then"*

She added:

> *"Sometimes I have to go in a mall just for me to connect...but still I experienced poor connection"*

Michelle also had to share:

> *"While I am listening to my instructor in a certain subject I experienced lagging in my internet. I cannot connect immediately due to internet lagging"*

She added:

> *"I have to make sure that I am the only one who is connected to our Wi-Fi for me to attend synchronous meetings...I have four siblings that's why we are all connected in Wi-Fi and that made me experience poor connection"*

*Poor understanding*

The covid-19 Pandemic greatly affected school institutions which forced them to adopt a new mode of teaching by implementing online distance education. The Higher Education Institutions in the Philippines applied synchronous and asynchronous approaches to pursue education amidst the pandemic. In synchronous virtual meetings, college students are expected to attend for them to have a deeper understanding of the lessons. Students described their challenges in synchronous virtual meetings as more difficult compared to face-to-face since they cannot understand easily their lessons virtually. Some of them shared that it is too hard for them to cope in virtual discussions which resulted in poor understanding. Jake shared that attending a class through a device only affects negatively his understanding of the lessons. He said:

> *"I feel like I am not learning anymore...I don't know the reason but it is too hard for me to understand a topic maybe because I prefer face-to-face learning to synchronous or just meeting virtually"*

He added:

> *"It is more difficult to understand a discussion through a screen of computer only"*

Michelle also described the changes in herself from being active to passive in a synchronous virtual discussion. She said;

> *"There was a time or most of the time sir when I cannot understand our discussion in synchronous or in a virtual meeting. I feel so sleepy learning through my phone watching my teacher talking and talking"*

She added:

> *"I am not like this before, it is easy for me to understand a discussion before but in the virtual discussion I found it very difficult"*

Joshua also described that he has to put more effort to understand a topic in synchronous discussion, and he also expressed that he was affected negatively by the way their teacher teaches them. He said:

> *"Listening in a synchronous or virtual meeting with my teachers is so challenging sir, seems like I have to level up my comprehension to understand my teacher"*

He added:

> *"I feel like my teacher is not motivated to teach...it also affects my performance which I don't understand her discussion"*

Maricar shared her struggle in synchronous virtual discussions which she cannot able to understand their topics virtually. She said:

> *"Virtual discussion with my subject teacher sir, I found it very difficult because there are topics that cannot be discussed virtual only, a reason why I am not able to understand some topics sir"*

She added:

> *"Hopefully face to face should be restored because I don't understand my teacher or what she is talking about during virtual discussion"*

*Financial difficulty*

The Pandemic brought economic challenges to all countries around the world and it greatly affected the lives of humanity. The educational sectors adopted online distance education to continue their vision and mission amid the pandemic. This setup of teaching and learning might be easy as what others think about it but it doesn't describe correctly the experiences of students. Some of the participants are facing difficulty in terms of financial matters because of the new way of learning. They are struggling with how to cope with the demands of synchronous virtual learning since it needs mobile data or wifi to be connected in the virtual discussion. Maricar shared that she is struggling financially due to the demands of synchronous virtual discussions. She said:

> *"It is too difficult this set up of learning...I spend almost 150 per day attending our synchronous discussions, that is one of my problems in synchronous discussions it consumes a big amount of data. I am financially struggling in this set up of learning"*

Andrea also shared that:

> *"I don't know where to get money for data load everyday...my parents don't have enough budget to sustain my studies due to pandemic"*

Princess also expressed:

> *"My parents lost their job due to the closure of companies amidst the pandemic...that's why I am struggling sir how to cope financially because in our synchronous discussion I need to reload my phone to be connected to online discussion"*

Joshua also had to share:

> *"Synchronous virtual discussion is good but you have to be financially stable to supply your data load every day sir...we are not rich...I am facing difficulty in terms of money sir...in every subject, I have to spend 20 pesos for data load and that is too big for me and my family sir"*

*Poor location for learning*

This pandemic threatens the people most especially the stakeholders in the academe. This case mandates all universities not to come to school and conduct face-to-face classes. As an intervention, universities employed online distance education to continue learning amid the pandemic. A reason why students can learn at home is by attending their classes virtually. In the second case, this is also a problem for the students since they are not able to concentrate due to distractions from their houses. According to the participants, they are distracted due to noise in their surroundings.

Princess shared:

> *"I am studying in a place that is full of noise...It distracts me most of the time, I can't concentrate"*

Maricar also explained that her siblings who are playing inside their house cause her distractions while listening to their instructors virtually. She stated:

> *"It is better that there must be at least limited face-to-face. I cannot work on my academic tasks, especially while having a virtual discussion with my instructors my siblings are too noisy playing and shouting inside my of our house"*

Jake also shared that due to vehicles that produce too much noise, he was not able to listen carefully to the discussions of his instructors. He said:

> *"I cannot understand our discussions with our instructors since those vehicles are producing noise, the reason also why I cannot concentrate"*

*Unorganized schedule for virtual meeting*

The schedule set by the registrar of the university must be organized for the students to their tasks efficiently in different subjects. It is reported by some of the participants that they are encountering problems on how to manage their time simply because of this unorganized schedule. They are having difficulties with the schedule of asynchronous and synchronous since there is no systematic schedule, the schedule change all the time depending on the decisions of their instructors. Joshua a third-year student also shared his sentiment on their schedule since it is not organized as expected to be. He said:

> *"Our schedule in synchronous is not systematic, there is no standard schedule, it will always depend on our instructors if they will meet us on this day or maybe tomorrow...this causes me confusion"*

Maricar also shared:

> *"I am rattled and confused...some instructors will conduct asynchronous on this day, some are synchronous...this is too hard for us, since in asynchronous we have activities to finish, and we cannot able to do this on time because of synchronous meeting with other instructors"*

Princess also suggested that:

> *"Based on my experience, the university must set the synchronous meeting every Monday to Wednesday and Thursday to Friday for asynchronous so there will be no confusion on us students"*

*Multiple uses of the online learning platform*

The university adopted the use of an online mode of teaching since face to face approach is not applicable due to the outbreak of coronavirus. To continue learning amidst the pandemic, instructors employed the use of different online learning platforms. This case brought a problem to the students since they are only using mobile phones. Some of them reported that most of their professors mandated them to download applications for online learning, the reason why their mobile phones are not functioning well. Andrea also shared her technical problem in every synchronous meeting she had with her instructors. She stated:

> *"I am having a technical problem since my phone is full storage due to many downloaded applications for online learning…we were mandated to download suggested apps by our instructors and there are too many, which causes my phone not to function well every synchronous meeting"*

Michelle also voiced out that their instructors are using different online teaching platforms which causes trouble on her phone. She said:

> *"I don't have a laptop to use… I'm using only a mobile phone it cannot contain too many applications, our instructors use Edmodo, Google meet, Google classroom, zoom app, ms teams, etc., I hate this because it troubles my phone… Sometimes I cannot be in our synchronous meeting because I am not good at all"* she said.

## CONCLUSION, IMPLICATION, AND RECOMMENDATION

This pandemic is indeed a challenge that brought so many changes in the academe. Students normally attend school face to face with their classmates but due to the coronavirus, most universities around the globe chose to lock down and adopted distance education. Students can attend online mode or known as synchronous meetings with their instructors. This case brought challenges as found out by this study. This study revealed that students are encountering a problem with their connection, it is also a problem on their part they cannot understand fully their discussions, and even financial problem is being encountered in this mode of teaching. It also showed that students are having difficulty with their location since they don't have a conducive place in their house to learn. An unorganized schedule and the use of the different online modes of teaching are also challenging on the part of students. It is indeed that students are not easily able to cope with the problems since they are not prepared for this situation. This study recommended that the national government and the sector of educators must take all actions to cater to the needs of the students especially by providing for their needs while adopting the new mode of learning. This study also suggested that future researchers have a deep exploration of the lived experiences of students amidst the pandemic, to explore their challenges and coping mechanisms.

## REFERENCES

Basilaia, G. & Kvavadze, D. (2020). Transition to online education in schools during a SARS-CoV-2 Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in Georgia. Pedagog. Res. 2020, 5, 1–9.
Bender, L. Key Messages and Actions for COVID-19 Prevention and Control in Schools.

Castaneda, D., Rentz, S. (2020). The Power of Discussion: Activating Learning Online (And in Person).

Berondo, R.G. & Dela Fuente, J.A. (2021). Technology Exposure: Its Relationship to the Study Habits and Academic Performance of Students. *Utamax : Journal of Ultimate Research and Trends in Education*, 3(3), 125-141. https://doi.org/10.31849/utamax.v3i3.7280

Dela Fuente, J.A. (2021). Contributing factors to the performance of pre-service physical science teachers in the Licensure Examination for Teachers (LET) in the Philippines. *Journal of Educational Research in Developing Areas*, 2(2), 141-152. https://doi.org/10.47434/JEREDA.2.2.2021.141

Dela Fuente, J.A. & Biñas, L.C. (2020). Teachers' competence in information and communications technology (ICT) as an educational tool in teaching: An empirical analysis for program intervention. *Journal of Research in Education, Science and Technology*, 5(2), 61-76.

Dela Fuente, J.A. (2019). Driving Forces of Students' Choice in specializing science: a science education context in the Philippines Perspective. *The Normal Lights*, 13(2), 225-250.

Dela Fuente, J.A. (2021). Facebook messenger as an educational platform to scaffold deaf students' conceptual understanding in environmental science subject: A single group quasi-experimental study. *International Journal of Education*, 14(1), 19-29. doi:10.17509/ije.v14i1.31386

Dela Fuente, J.A. (2021). Implementing inclusive education in the Philippines. College teacher experiences with deaf students. *Issues in Educational Research*, 31(1), 94-110. http://www.iier.org.au/iier31/dela-fuente.pdf

Gabor, A. (2020). Schools Aren't Ready for Online Learning.

Mather, M. & Sarkans, A. (2018). Student perceptions of online and face-to-face learning. *Int. J. Curric. Instr.*, 10, 61–76.

Neil, K. (2020). Using Social Distance to Strengthen University Communities.

Ramadan, S. (2020). Covid-19: 9 universities are now conducting classes online. Hype.

Reimers, F., Schleicher, A., Saavedra, J., & Tuominen, S. (2020). Supporting the Continuation of Teaching and Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic Annotated Resources for Online Learning.

UNESCO (2020). COVID-19 and Higher Education: Today and Tomorrow. Impact Analysis, Policy Responses and Recommendations. 2020.

World Health Organization (2020). Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) situation reports.