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Overcoming the Feeling Isolation in Distance Learning: A Collaborative Autoethnographic Research

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ABSTRACT

In this mini-research, we present our own experience as distance education (DE) learners the process of overcoming the feelings of alienation and isolation. The participants of the study are the authors, themselves, which are graduate students from the University of the Philippines – Open University. Thus, auto-ethnography is used. Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno) (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010). This research is significant because we, the authors ourselves, are distance learners and have experienced isolation in our journey.

KEY WORDS: *isolation; alienation; distance learning; e-learning; distance education; autoethnography; qualitative research*

1.0 Introduction

The swift shift of educational setup and lesson delivery in the Philippines, due to COVID-19, has made educational institutions crumble to pivot from regular brick-and-mortar type of classes to total virtual and distance form of education. The education department is doing its everything in order to smoothly transition, thus focusing only on how schools are going to deliver the curriculum in different modes except the regular schooling pre-pandemic. In previous months, different academic organizations and schools conducted webinars about online teaching techniques, online or distance assessment methods, technology-dependent projects and many more to prepare the teachers in the new normal. This leaves the learners at the space without receiving any training on how they are going to perform as a distance or online learners.

1.1 Reviewed Empirical Literature

The distance mode of education plays an important role in meeting the need of persons who are in great demand of education but can't complete their studies from the formal or regular system of education (Attri, 2012).

In addition, distance learning is a constantly evolving method of education with specific features, on the grounds that distance learning students' study away from both the tutor and the educational organization (Vakoufari, Christina, & Mavroidis 2014). The Web has had a resounding impact on education by both augmenting classroom activities and giving educators new ways to teach (Dickey, 2004). Since the age of the internet and the fast pace of the human race, the demand for skills and higher education soared at a far-reaching phase (Vonberg, 2015).

As the people get busier and the internet gets faster, learners have become more flexible in their learning styles. And with that schools and universities, with this changing phenomenon, have to adapt in order to meet needs. Most higher education institutions in each country have started offering learning in distance mode to fit on the hectic schedules of the learners. Online lesson design has moved from a specialized skill to one that's much more common, and in the right schools, a necessary skill (Lineberger, 2016). Distance education therefore works in a more flexible and friendly environment leading to improved balance between students' course work in their lives, reduces stress, and absenteeism (Badu-Nyarko, 2010).

Consequently, distance or online education is nothing without its issues and challenges, and one of them is on the student's part which is isolation. According to Cambridge Dictionary, isolation is: "the condition of being alone, especially when this makes you feel unhappy"; or "the fact that something is separate and not connected to other things"; or "the condition of being separated from other people, towns, countries, etc.". This definition is congruent to the study conducted by Mbukusa, Kibuule, & Lates, (2017) of University of Namibia. They mentioned that, isolation could be typified by time (concurrent study); space (geographic dispersal); social (awareness of others), intellectual/experience (academic ability and life experiences); profession (subject related expertise); ICT knowledge; sensory (ability to see/feel/hear peers); cultural; and subject (if anyone else is studying the same topic).

At most, higher education institutions' distance learners have the highest risk of dropping out of their programmes of study. This can be attributed in large part to the isolation experienced by these students (Chan and Lee, 2007). They (Chan and Lee, 2007) added that students of all kinds want to have a sense of belonging to a larger university community, rather than simply being an enrollee, or worse, a part of statistics for the course.

Burns (2016) mentioned that forty per cent (40%) of the learners globally have dropped out from the distance mode of education. One of the reasons Burns cited is the paradigm that learners have to study alone – hence “solo learner”. Without a sense of connection, she added, learners’ engagement decreases and eventually leaves or quits from the program. To add to that, the challenges of distance learning amplifies when learners are geographically isolated (Galusha, 1998). Galusha added that it will more complicate the results of the learning process for adult learners. In study conducted at the largest open university in India, Indira Ghandi National Open University (IGNOU), out of the top nine reasons of distance learners’ withdrawal, according to the respondents, in the program is not being able to visit Study Centres or learning centers to attend various counselling and coaching, thus triggered their action (Fozdar, Kumar, & Kannan, 2006). According to Gillet-Swan (2017), some of the issues experienced can be personal such as: anxiety associated with using technology; being out of one’s comfort zone; (perception of) inequity in assessment, particularly in “group” assignments; and, the (perceived) inability or difficulty in peer interaction, particularly in presentations.

A study conducted by Rush (2015), with one thousand and two (1,002) total of student respondents from University of Tasmania, Australia were identified as studying at a distance. Students were asked “*What does isolation mean to you?*”, in the Likert-style explorations respondents mentioned that: “*they feel out of the loop*”; “*feeling like you are not connected or have been forgotten*”; “*I feel like I’m the only one studying the subject*”; and, “*you feel like quite alone*”. In the same study, over half of the respondents said that the best aspect of being distance students was ‘flexibility’. However, the respondents also mentioned that the worst part is the isolation and lack of contact. A study that is also congruent by the research conducted to the students of

Zimbabwe Open University. In the study (Chinwanza, Mapuranga, Musingafi, Zebron, 2015), the authors mentioned that the delayed and ineffective feedback (lacking of contact) added burden to the learners which added to the existing struggles of being isolated.

On the other hand, a study done by Al-Harthi (2005), the author cited the students view isolation in a different way. The author cited that feelings of isolation and distance can evoke different meaning depending on the cultural orientation of the student. In the paper, the study conducted in a northwestern university in the U.S., students from Asia-Pacific were more concerned about the isolation from the instructors. It was mentioned that the said students view the instructors as ‘figure of authority’ and the person ‘with answers’. On the other hand, the European counterpart views isolation as the missed opportunity for discussions and debates.

In examining the following literature about the isolation, we developed a one qualitative question to systematically process the experience of the participants of the study. This qualitative research paper will focus on the participants’ experiences journey on overcoming the isolation of being distance or online learners. This study will answer only one qualitative research question: “How did you overcome the feeling of isolation in your distance education journey?”

2.0 Methodology and Data Collection

2.1 Collaborative Autoethnography

Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*) (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010). Autoethnography retrospectively and selectively indicates experiences based on, or made possible by, being part of a culture or owning a specific cultural identity. Telling about the experience though must be accompanied by a critical reflection of the lived experience to conform to social science publishing conventions (Pitard, 2016). In addition, autoethnography is a relatively new research paradigm that offers reflective narratives to elucidate the researcher’s personal experiences to analyze cultural beliefs, practices, and the social experiences that influence our identities (Allen, 2015).

This definition is congruent with the narrative inquiry principle of the researcher's story being intrinsic to the study. Narrative inquirers engage in intense and transparent reflection and questioning of their own position, values, beliefs and cultural background. There is, therefore, much potential for such articulation of self-awareness and reflexivity to be used in and to enrich research in intercultural communication (Trahar, 2009).

We are graduate students who want to practice professional qualitative research undertaking in which we will involve ourselves as both the researchers and participants, hence autoethnography. As the writers of this research, we will go in depth to the culture and phenomenon of distance learning, particularly to the affective domain as learners. We are going to write in a systematic analysis, in this mini research, our experiences that lead us to engage in the culture.

As we share our analysis to our own experiences, readers could expect that not all DE learners may have the same experiences as what we had. This autoethnography research aims to help future and aspiring students on the start of the journey as distance learners.

2.2 Participants

Jayrome Núñez (Jay) is an overseas-based Filipino in West Asia working as an instructor. He started being a distance learner in 2015 through massive open online courses (MOOC) from different universities around the world. He got his Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) Certificate in 2016, and is currently taking an online Professional Certification in Educational Management and Leadership. In 2017, he joined UPOU as an offshore MDE student.

Marie Camille Cuisia-Villanueva (Mimi) is also an overseas-based Filipino working as an administrator in the United Kingdom. She started exploring distance learning not long after she finished her TESOL and Information Technology Infrastructure Library (ITIL) qualifications around 2015. She joined UPOU in 2018 with the hopes of providing quality distance education to disadvantaged learners in the Philippines.

2.3 Data Collection

The methods used for this research are in-depth interviews with each other (collaborative) and analysis of each dialogue through transcriptions. Since both of us are separated by time and space, we had scheduled a Zoom meeting in order to conduct the systematic process. In the interview, participants asked each other questions in relation to the area being researched.

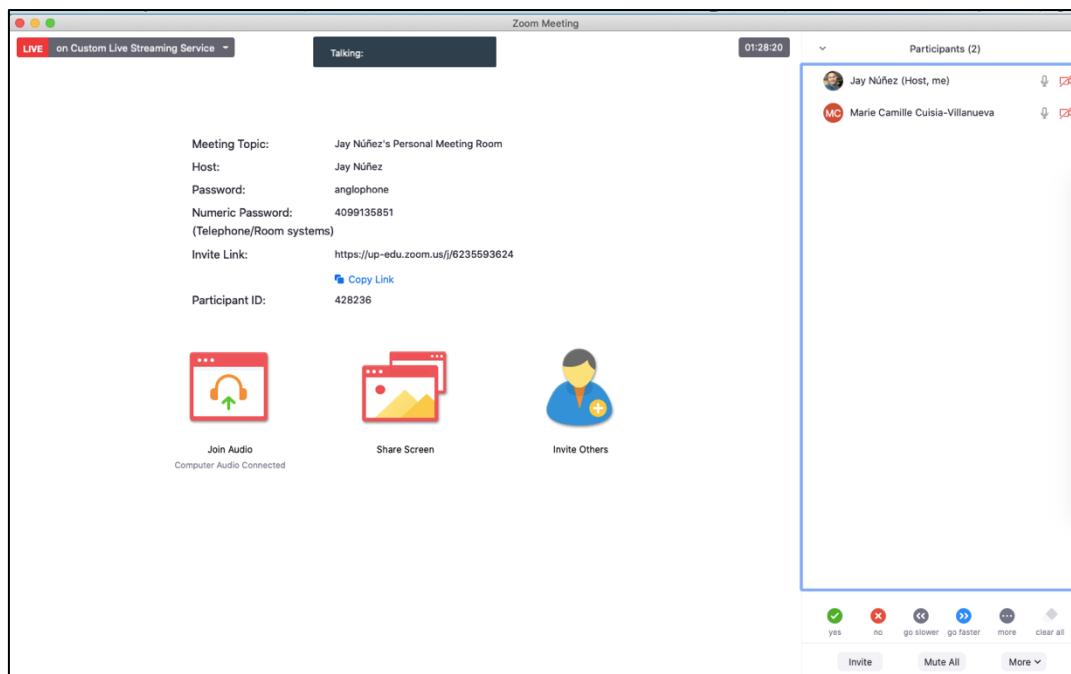


Figure 1. Screen grab of the Zoom conference between the authors.

3.1 Setting

The setting of the study is conducted upon the students of Masters in Distance Education (MDE) from the University of the Philippines – Open University (UPOU). UPOU is the premier open university in the Philippines that offers pure online and distance learning mode. MDE is one of the pure online degrees that the university offers to its learners. The program is offered in a trimestral cycle, with ten (10) to twelve (12) weeks span per term.

The authors/participants were admitted in two separate terms and two different academic years and both pursuing MDE at the said university. In the program, learners can apply anytime of the year and can be admitted to the nearest incoming term to start

the study. Learners in the program are either living in any part of the Philippines or working and living abroad (offshore).

UPOU categorizes its learners into two, local and offshore. Local learners are those living and working within the Philippines while offshore are those students (foreign and Filipino citizens) living or working overseas. The authors/participants in this study are categorized as offshore learners. Both of them are hours behind the time zone of the university: the United Kingdom, seven (7) hours; and Saudi Arabia, five (5) hours.

3.2 Starting the DE journey

Jayrome's narrative is all about how he discovered that there is UPOU which offers a fully online master's degree in the Philippines. He mentioned that MOOCs helped him improve his skills even when the courses taken did not have academic credits or bearing.

"When I arrived here in KSA, I never thought that I couldn't enroll in an online mode to attain a degree. All I was doing was just MOOC to supplement my teaching skills and improve my CV."

In his narrative, one of the reasons he couldn't enroll in a graduate institution is the cost. According to Attri (2012), distance education can provide less cost. This is one of the reasons why he opted to enroll in UPOU instead from the universities where he lives.

"Since I was here in KSA, getting a graduate education is quite a challenge because the universities and institutions here could cost me more than my annual salary. It was impossible. The same scenario if I opt to enroll in western universities which are even more expensive."

During the conversation, he added that it was a tough process from accomplishing all the paper works and travelling to places to secure requirements. Not having someone to connect from the university was one of the factors that made it more difficult for him.

“At the very first, all I had was just the list of requirements I needed to accomplish in order to get admitted to the program. It was tough, I had to travel from Quezon Province to Ilocos Sur and back to Laguna to submit my papers. Working on this had given me a hint that it would be like this throughout the journey – alone!”

The other author, Mimi, explained that her interest in distance education rooted in her past experiences in college. She struggled juggling her academics and career and she thought it could have been better if her school had more flexible options.

“It’s hard when you have to choose between academics and career. In my case, I’d love to choose studying but I can’t afford not to work. It’s sad when you see the rest of your batchmates continuously progress at school and you’re left with no choice but to enroll whenever you have the chance. It’s disappointing that the school doesn’t have flexible options so I had to wait until a course was available and I had to deal with work at the same time. The solution I came up was to switch careers and I landed a flexible ESL job. This paved way for me to experience teaching at a distance and I was able to finish my undergraduate degree at the same time. This experience opened my eyes to exploring distance education options the next time I study.”

She later explained that enrolling in a university that offers distance education was the best option for her as she had to leave the Philippines and work overseas. Upon researching, she came across UPOU and decided to join the MDE program. However, same as Jayrome, not having any leads and late feedback from the university made it more difficult for her to enroll. According to Chan and Lee (2007), the lack of contact and feedback is inherent and has been identified as one of the major problems for students studying in this mode.

“I was able to submit my requirements without any problems but hearing from the university itself was another issue. I was already in the United Kingdom when I was waiting for results and it was hard to do

long-distance calls without the assurance that someone will answer my queries. I think it was frustrating to be alone in the process and it took me lots of courage to try and reach out to UPOU students that are active in social media platforms. I just got lucky that one of those who responded will actually support me all the way!"



Figure 2. Screenshot of the authors' first conversation about UPOU

3.3 Challenges encountered in the journey

In their respective entry dates, the authors did not know how the process will work as they did not have connections at the start of the very first course. In most universities, external students in institutions have the highest risk for withdrawal from studies of any group in the first year of the study (Lake, 1999).

Jay: "At the start of EDDE 201, I never felt I belonged to a learning community, because I didn't know anyone - literally. It was a challenge. I tried to reach out on the Class List posted on the portal, but unfortunately nobody seemed to have time to reply. It was a slow and desolate journey in that course."

Mimi: "I followed the program offerings as suggested by the program chair. I thought that as long as I go with the flow, I will never have issues with the DE setup. Never did I know I would experience difficulties the moment the term started. Being enrolled in two courses with no one to

turn to made me feel helpless and intimidated at times. I even questioned myself why I started this learning process in the first place.”

Jay: “It got worse during the term because I wasn’t at school for a very long time and writing a research paper wasn’t really giving me any good. I was so desperate that I had to hire a tutor to help me write a position paper. I was at the brink of dropping out and just leaving everything behind.”

The narratives illustrate the isolation challenges mostly on the fact that they are offshore learners and have to deal with time zone differences and lack of communication with peers. In addition to that, group work collaboration made it even more challenging to engage with peers in the Philippines. The lack of interaction and discussion between students lessens the richness of the learning experience and omits a significant element of the constructivist approach to learning (Croft, Dalton, & Grant, 2010).

Mimi: “It was often problematic whenever there were group works. They acknowledged the difference between time zones but I had to prove myself twice as hard. Even if we set schedules, my group mates would often start conference calls without considering my hours. I’ve had moments where I had to answer unarranged calls while I was sleeping or at work. I never thought I could still feel isolated even if I belong in a group. The thought didn’t bother me that much and all group works were successful but it disappoints me that I have to endure this every time.”

Jay: “One of the challenges that I encountered on the very first group activity was the difference in time zone and day offs. In order for me to engage with the live video calls, we had to compromise with our time so we could all meet. Another experience was during our EDDE 210. If I remember it right, there were synchronous chat sessions that our professor had organized (I think, three or four), I was only able to

join one – the last one. I had to take a break from work in order to experience the last live chat with my classmates and professor.”

They also mentioned that feelings of alienation even grew stronger because of the authors' perceptions on their classmates who are living in the Philippines.

Jay: “At first, I was trying to reach out to some classmates who I found on Facebook in order for me to communicate and perhaps ask for help in relation to the course. In the search for a virtual friend, I failed in my attempts for nobody messaged me back.”

Mimi: “It was very hard because expressing oneself is different through chat or email. I always keep things professional but I still try to win some friends. It’s not easy with local students as there’s the issue of different time zones. It’s really difficult when you’re an offshore student because you always have to reach out more. I’ve had instances where some of my classmates won’t reply to my messages (even if it’s about group works) but would actively respond to others. It’s just a strange feeling, though I respect that it’s part of our ‘netiquette’ to reply only when we want to. Oddly enough I also find myself closer to other offshore students and they’ve shared they’ve had similar experiences. I just hope that this gap between local and offshore students will disappear someday.”

In addition to that, the lack of feedback and clear instructions from the professors, who they viewed as person of authority (Al-Harthi, 2005) in the class, had also left them lost.

Mimi: “I’ve had a term where the faculty in charge’s (FIC) presence could not be felt. Most of the students enrolled are from the same batch; hence I have contact with them and confirmed all of us don’t get replies from her. As professionals taking graduate studies we are expected to have higher levels of knowledge and autonomy; albeit we still encounter things that need clarifications especially in regards to coursework. To

make matters worse, the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic happened so we expected to hear nothing as the term approached its end. Surprisingly, the FIC made an announcement explaining her current situation, thus dismissing the case. Nonetheless, we still felt isolated throughout the term as dialogue and feedback were absent when we needed it the most. We just used our remaining days to check on each other and at least close the term with a sense of community and belongingness."

Jay: "There were subjects where our FICs will just dump all the things that we need to do and read, and never hear from them anymore. Sometimes, instructions were not clear enough to follow which made us confused. There was even a course where our FIC forgot to open the discussions and activities for almost a month that we had to request the university admin to ask about the situation."

3.4 Current status as DE learner: Surviving the process

Currently, the authors still continue their academic journey as distance learners. They explained that regardless of how prepared or smart they are as a student, isolation and alienation could really affect the process of learning in any form. They also emphasized the importance of community (Croft, Dalton, & Grant, 2010) in distance learning, especially when someone lives abroad. It is also not just a community of learning but also social personal interaction (Scott, 2017) because both of them are working adults and may share the same personal struggles.

Jay: "I am now in my 3rd year as UPOU - MDE student, so far I was able to surpass the part where I have to reach out for someone in order to feel I belong. As I continue my journey I gained friends from all around the world and developed my independence and self-reliance. When you have at least someone to share your same path, it totally paints a different picture. I didn't just get one, but I got a community of learners, mostly offshore, who understand where I am coming from. It is important to build a network of connections to be able to overcome the misery of studying alone."

Mimi: “Now that I’m in my second year of being a DE student, I can say that I’ve matured somehow. I’ve realized that I shouldn’t linger excessively on thoughts about being isolated or being alienated, though those experiences surely gave me a lesson. Those circumstances didn’t change my attitude of reaching out twice as hard to my classmates, but they changed the way I look at things. I still continue to actively communicate to groupmates I come across and make sure I establish our differences in work and personal schedules. However, if I don’t get any response and it affects assignments or projects, I stand firm and do what’s right. I used to fret overtime but I have gone through this kind of attitude. Presently, I’m delighted to have a solid connection with a good community of learners who support my DE process in UPOU.”

4.0 Recommendations, Conclusions, and Directions for Future Research

Isolation really affects someone’s academic performance, much more if the student lives in a foreign land with different time zones and work schedules. In the conversation between authors, the main causes of isolation for them are the geographical and time zone differences. Being away from home and living in a different nation can totally make someone feel isolated, as evident from the narratives of the authors. They suggest that, both onshore and offshore learners have to compromise in order to bridge the gap of time zones and nobody would feel excluded. Isolation therefore can be overcome by ensuring that there is more and frequent communication to students (Mbukusa, Kibuule, & Lates, 2017).

One of the most important steps that an offshore learner could do to get over from isolation is to reach out from other offshore learners because they, too, surely understand the challenges of being away from home and learning at the same time. As both the authors experienced, they were able to build a solid communication with their peers who are also living abroad. It was easier to socialize due to proximity in time zone and similarity of life experiences (Hughes, & Daykin, 2002). A good network of people will breakdown the wall of isolation (Falloon, 2011).

In addition, in this time of COVID-19 pandemic, this research can be used by learners who will be transitioning from traditional brick-and-mortar mode to online and distance

learning. Our experiences will serve as the guidance on how they are going to battle isolation in the new normal of formal education.

For the future researchers, this topic could be strengthened using quantitative research that will be conducted to onshore learners or with bigger number of involved participants. Furthermore, we encourage learners, educators, and researchers to continue to study on this topic and other related ideas that would help our learners overcome the hurdles of learning at a distance – in any form.

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