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## College Education Students' Learning Experiences on the Advent of Online Distance Education in the Philippines: A Phenomenological Study

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### Abstract

The introduction of online distance learning in the Philippines was like the emergence of an uninvited houseguest who refused to leave. This pandemic disrupted the status quo of education, and as a result, institutions resorted to using online distance learning methods. The purpose of this research was to explore the home-based learning experiences of college education students. Phenomenological interviews were used to collect information from 15 participants of the study. Overall, a text analysis was structured around their perspectives on learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and found significant themes related to online distance education like methods and means regarding how college students manage their learning activities; challenges unique to online distance education including issues with technology and internet access, problems creating a conducive learning atmosphere, and a lack of financial resources for acquiring necessary learning resources. Yet, online distance education has positives like lower costs as travel and uniforms are cut; students become adaptable to the circumstances and independent learners; and some can work while learning to support themselves. Students' technological capacity, personal beliefs, and viewpoints to support learning resolve the problems.

### Keywords

Covid-19, online distance education, students' experiences, qualitative approach

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The introduction of online distance learning in the Philippines was like the emergence of an uninvited houseguest who refused to leave. This pandemic disrupted the status quo of education, and as a result, institutions resorted to using online distance learning methods. The purpose of this research was to explore the home-based learning experiences of college education students. Phenomenological interviews were used to collect information from 15 participants of the study. Overall, a text analysis was structured around their perspectives on learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and found significant themes related to online distance education like methods and means regarding how college students manage their learning activities; challenges unique to online distance education including issues with technology and internet access, problems creating a conducive learning atmosphere, and a lack of financial resources for acquiring necessary learning resources. Yet, online distance education has positives like lower costs as travel and uniforms are cut; students become adaptable to the circumstances and independent learners; and some can work while learning to support themselves. Students' technological capacity, personal beliefs, and viewpoints to support learning resolve the problems.

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## Introduction

UNESCO (n.d.) says that the COVID-19 pandemic is a worldwide health emergency that has changed everything. There has been a big change in education from face-to-face classrooms to different kinds of distance education (Ali, 2020). E-learning, or online distance education, has become a new way to teach and learn (Al-Balas et al., 2020). This has shown that many educational institutions in the country and abroad were not ready for it. The fact that administrators, teachers, and students don't want to follow the policy shows that they aren't ready in its initial phase in the first quarter of 2020 and even into the first quarter of 2021. This phenomenon has affected 463 million children worldwide who were unable to access remote learning during COVID-19 school closures in 2020 (Reuge et al., 2021).

The Republic of the Philippines Commission on Higher Education (CHED) says that stakeholders need to work together to move from face-to-face instruction to a more flexible method while keeping the quality of education high (Commission on Higher Learning, 2020). This method will be used starting in the academic year 2020-2021, and it may be used again after that. According to CHED Chair Popoy De Vera, flexible learning has now become the norm, and it is implausible to go back to the full-pack face-to-face classroom setting (Magsambol, 2021). Although some SUCs were approved to reopen for limited face-to-face classes, Kalinga State University was not among them. According to Kalinga's local chief

executive, a few courses may be held in HEIs if strict adherence to minimum health protocols is maintained and in consultation with concerned LGUs and the CHED ((Magsambol, 2021).

This phenomenon presented both challenges and opportunities for teachers and students. Among the challenges encountered is internet connectivity, especially in rural areas where few or no cell sites have been put up. At Kalinga State University, instructors, professors, and students find adjusting to the so-called new standard teaching and learning modality challenging. This unique teaching and learning modality may comprise several dimensions, demanding various competencies such as professional subject knowledge, pedagogical skills, educational psychology, web design, layout, and computer skills (Karlsudd & Tågerud, 2008). The researchers spent much time exploring and discovering ways to explore and learn the programs and platforms of distance-online teaching in synchronous and asynchronous modalities. This is also true for other faculty, especially those not so adept with digital technologies. Students find it more challenging due to a lack of gadgets, know-how skills, and excellent connectivity.

As part of the effort to sustain the new education as the way people teach and learn around the world changes in big ways, new studies are also being done to find out more about this. Since this is a recent phenomenon, there may not be much literature on other phenomena. Though distance online education has been used for quite some time, as early as the 1990s (Barrot et al., 2021), in higher education institutions in first-world countries with advanced technologies like the U.S. (Montelongo, 2019), this method is new in the Philippines, especially in the undergraduate programs of higher education institutions (HEIs).

The pandemic has opened a discussion about how to incorporate internet-based learning and identify educational approaches that are fit for the current situation (Keswani et al., 2020). Making appropriate educational policy is essential, especially considering COVID-19, as the pandemic involves issues beyond the classroom. The resolve action is the introduction of online distance education in the Philippines which uses the internet (Moneymax, n.d.) and can be asynchronous or synchronous (Donitsa-Schmidt & Ramot, 2020). Asynchronous online classrooms allow students to access and submit their work at any time. Synchronous online classes require real-time interactions or simultaneous interactions in multiple places between students and teachers.

This study captured the experiences of college education students as they continued with their schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic and helped to explain and demonstrate what students experience when there is a sudden change in how they are taught and learn. Since they are the most important people in the learning process (Baticulon et al., 2021), it is very important to understand how they feel about the new normal. By knowing and understanding their experiences and situations, faculty and the institution can respond by changing policies and procedures as needed. Studies discussing life-long learning emphasize the importance of the regular educational system's capability to adapt to a more flexible education, and this only becomes possible by taking into consideration the authentic experiences of the learners (Karlsudd & Tågerud, 2008). The researchers find the inputs are essential for developing policies and programs that will help students get ready for and cope with the new normal. An in-depth analysis of the experiences of students is provided by emphasizing the backdrop of the Philippine educational scene. The study's findings will be included in the development of flexible educational strategies for the new normal.

## **Literature Review**

There are gaps in the existing literature addressing students' challenges in an online distance education system. Aulia et al. (2020) also identified that there are future possibilities

for more research on students' challenges and opportunities in the contemporary education system at various levels of education.

Similar research studies have identified challenges in online education. Schumpe et al. (2022) stated that students, particularly those from underprivileged backgrounds who live in remote, outlying areas, appear to suffer more from these contextual realities than other students. Increasing numbers and various online assessments appear to be weighing them down, their educational experiences with online instruction generally appeared to have little impact that equal amount of effort must be made to improve the health of both teachers and students to counterbalance the overwhelming focus paid to online pedagogical techniques around the world. Accessibility, cost, flexibility, learning pedagogy, life-long learning, and educational policy are the main issues with e-learning (Murgatroid, 2020). In many countries, it is hard to get digital devices and a reliable Internet connection. While poor children in many developing nations are unable to buy online learning gadgets, the risk of increasing screen time for the learner exists with online education. It is now crucial for students to participate in offline activities and self-directed learning. Another issue is a lack of parental supervision, especially for younger students because both parents are employed. There are practical concerns about physical workstations supportive of various learning styles.

Similar claims were made by Kecojevic et al. (2020), who attributed the problems in teaching and learning in the education industry to the COVID-19 experience. According to Shahzad et al. (2020), the rise of virtual teaching and learning has been a response to school closures in the context of education in Pakistan. Students have been forced by the pandemic to juggle a variety of responsibilities in their professional and personal life, according to Bal et al. (2020).

In contrast to weak learners, the vulnerable group of students is relatively unaffected by their learning since they require little monitoring and direction. Some academically gifted students from underprivileged backgrounds are unable to access or finance online education. Due to the decreased amount of contact time for students and the lack of teacher advice when encountering learning or understanding challenges, the level of academic performance of the students is expected to decline for the classes held for both the year-end assessment and internal examination (Sintema, 2020).

Some parents believe it would be preferable to let their kids repeat the course the following academic year. Aside from having poor Internet access, many students do not have access to smartphones or televisions at home. Due to the closing of businesses and offices, a large population has no or little income. Continuous Internet connectivity is expensive for the farming community, and the data package costs are high in comparison to the average income earned.

Most people recommend taking face-to-face classes online through video; however, some students, particularly those from economically poor backgrounds, have complained that doing so uses up more data. The teachers are struggling with who to listen to and what resources to use. Pre-recorded videos, according to some, could be helpful, but they would limit interactions. It is challenging to create a suitable system that meets the needs of all students in terms of convenience and learning.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created several opportunities for the unprepared and distant plans of implementing an e-learning system, despite the overwhelming challenges that have been faced by educators, schools, institutes, and the government regarding online education from various perspectives. Even though learners, educators, schools, institutes, and the government have been facing a lot of problems with online education from many different points of view, the COVID-19 pandemic has opened a lot of opportunities for those who aren't ready or haven't thought about setting up an e-learning system yet. For the first time ever, online platforms like Google Classroom, Zoom, virtual learning environments, social media, and

many group forums like Telegram, Messenger, WhatsApp, and WeChat are used to test and look at teaching and learning. Even when face-to-face teaching starts up again, this can be investigated more, and these platforms can give students more resources and coaching. Unlike traditional classroom settings, online learning has given teachers and students the chance to teach and learn in novel ways.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The proponents of the study have adhered very closely to the ethical research protocols to accomplish the goals of the research. All participants completed an informed consent form regarding their voluntary participation in the research, which did not pose any concerns to the researcher or the participants in terms of ethics or safety. As part of the ethical standards, an acceptable level of secrecy is assured for the data that was acquired because these are the only data that will be used for the purpose of this study.

### **Methodology**

This study uses a phenomenological design that employs phenomenological interviews to enable knowledge of the universal essences and comprehension of those eidetic structures from the perspectives of the researcher and study participants (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, (2017). According to Creswell et al. (2007), this type of qualitative study describes a certain group, like the college students, who shared meanings and the similarity of their lived experiences during the epidemic. The researchers encouraged the interviewees to explain their personal experiences while also illuminating the deeper significance of those encounters through their interpretations. We tried to establish a secure, dependable, and fluid environment throughout the interview process to make the conversational interaction exciting and successful. Also, we wanted the research participants to discuss their experiences after answering the research questions without making any assumptions or asking leading questions.

Using Seidman's (2006) structure for in-depth phenomenological interviewing, we conducted in-depth phenomenological interviews with each participant separately, using the framework to thoroughly cover the study's topic and problem. With each study participant, a succession of three distinct interview times makes this model possible. Interview number one lasted between 20 and 25 minutes and focused on the participants' context of experience. The second interview lasted 30 minutes and was centered on reconstructing the participants' present experiences. Meaning was the focus of interview three, which lasted 35 to 40 minutes. To encourage the participants to reflect on the prior interview and refrain from losing connection between the two previous interviews, we separated each interview by two days. The participants were kept from becoming distracted, which would have diminished the effectiveness of the interview sessions.

The analysis of the data followed a sequential form of analysis. In phenomenological data analysis, grouping the data through iterative code refinement is one of the analytical activities. The links and interconnections between and among the several steps illustrate how the refining of codes progresses from first-impression data condensation to more thorough data analysis, culminating in the consolidation of these components of the study (Aguas, 2022). The approach that is described below enables the researcher to get a complete description. We used bracketing with a phenomenological perspective. By bracketing, the researcher adopts a phenomenological approach and considers the subjects' inherent attitudes. We further connected participant verbatim transcripts to descriptions of the phenomenon under inquiry using color codes. The researchers used the study questions to process the data to find, describe, and make sense of common experiences, summarize important statements, make categories,

come up with themes, and deal with a lot of data. We made broad and detailed categories to cover and account for all the basic categories. We also made a list of every category that could be used to describe the experience of the phenomenon. These became the constant parts of the experience, and we told stories to describe the texture and structure of the thing we were studying and to explain how it worked. This textual narrative described the experiences as well as how and what the research subjects perceived them.

## **Results and Discussion**

This section presents the data collected and the analysis to systematically address the questions of the study, "What are the learning experiences of college education students with the advent of online distance education?" The discussion is divided into three themes: (1) How college of education students manage their educational activities during the pandemic, (2) the challenges faced, and (3) the perceived opportunities while studying.

### **Method and Means on How the College of Education Students Manage Their Educational Activities**

The whole universe is surprised by how quickly and drastically things have changed because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the health crisis. As a result, one of the sectors of every nation, the education sector, is greatly affected as they are moving to online distance education as a quick and effective way to keep doing their school activities. Talidong and Toquero (2020) have pointed out that even though Filipino teachers had positive attitudes during the COVID-19 pandemic, they were still vulnerable because the outbreak is still going on. Even though classes were canceled, and it was hard to get to school, students still had to do their schoolwork. P-11's response demonstrates this: "Since I couldn't go to libraries because of the pandemic, I used e-learning resources from various websites, journals, and other online libraries."

College students in different places have different experiences with online distance learning, so they use different methods when they work online. Like P-8, who "needs to travel or hike to the highest point in their place just to access data to open materials uploaded in the Google Classroom and attend scheduled virtual meetings with our professors." He further added, "I maximized the use of internet-based research and web searches while I am on top of the mountain since it is difficult to go back if the weather is not good." P-5 added, "I finally find a place for me to do online activities, but I need to climb a tree since this is the means for me to be connected." In the same way, P-4 "did her synchronous and asynchronous activities on the roof of their house."

P-1 added, "As a college student living in a remote area, I have found that working from home may not be an option since I experienced zero internet connections, as well as a lack of infrastructure. So, I decided to rent a room in the city to attend lectures and comply with any form of assessment and evaluation posted." P-9 further added, "I have structured effectively my class portfolio in my boarding house, and I am happy that our professors were very considerate on some late submissions."

The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted confidence among Filipino learners, in addition to technological know-how for online instruction to function well (König et al., 2020). College students in the Philippines are fighting COVID-19 with a never-say-die attitude, saying that education should continue no matter what.

### **The Greatest Challenge: Internet Connection and Technology (Electronic Equipment), Face-to-Face Engagement, and Online Learning Distraction**

The challenges encountered by college education students in completing their coursework during the COVID-19 pandemic are grouped into three categories. They include (a) issues with internet connections and the availability of technological gadgets; (b) a lack of face-to-face engagement with the professors; and (c) a conducive learning environment.

The major difficulty encountered by P-3 in their remote locality was joining the scheduled virtual discussion once a week and accessing materials uploaded using Google Classroom as an online tool for digital learning; submitting coursework online posed the greatest problem: "My internet connection was unstable every time I joined the Google Meet session," (p. 6) further added, "and it took a longer time to reload the connection and download an important activity to be submitted in a specified time." "I am worried every time I turn in an activity, especially activities with a deadline," (p. 1) added. Many responses pertain to the students' bad internet service usage. Some believe that this issue will result in even worse outcomes, as revealed by P-10. Mohammed et al. (2020) said that due dates for assignments should be flexible within modules, department policies, and overall institutional policies. This would be in line with the move to emergency remote teaching.

Similarly, the greatest obstacle faced by P-8 is "the poor internet connection and lack of access to critical readings that could be useful in any coursework. "The unique challenge is that we cannot avoid optimally employing technology," which, as P-12 said, requires an adequate internet connection. According to a study by Pastor (2020), students in the Philippines are not yet prepared to learn using the synchronous method of instruction, highlighting the necessity to identify an alternative learning mode. Since different methods of education delivery have not been studied in the Philippines, the impact of the pandemic has been difficult.

In a recent study of medical students by Baticulon et al. (2021), about 22% did not have a reliable internet connection. This reflects the fact that 45% of Filipino citizens and 74% of public schools do not have access to the internet (Joaquin et al., 2020) and confirms the findings of (Rotas & Cahapay, 2020) that distance-online learning is challenging for those who cannot afford to buy needed gadgets and sustain the high cost of load, as P-1 and P-5 participants said, "nagastos ti load ti expensive" and "nangina cellphone ken laptop" (it is costly to buy a cellular phone and laptop) respectively.

Another difficult thing is that they have trouble learning because there aren't enough virtual discussions. They are used to face-to-face classrooms where teachers have to talk about almost every lesson. Virtual meetings, on the other hand, are limited in distance education online; teachers only meet their students virtually once a week and are limited to one hour per meeting. As a result, the P-7 stated, "Nagrigat maawatan lessons ta adu ti haan maidiscuss, haan nga kasla idi face-to-face" (it is difficult to understand the lessons because many are not discussed, as opposed to face-to-face). Another reason for the difficulty of understanding the lessons is the lack of or limited scaffolding or supervision from teachers (Rotas & Cahapay, 2020). Hence, P-5 said, "nu adda haan mi maawatan ket awan pagdamagan mi, haan nga kasla idi face-to-face nga damagen mi teachers mi" (during face-to-face, if there were lessons, we did not understand, we asked our teachers, unlike today). Given a choice, students prefer face-to-face classes due to the difficulties they are experiencing (Seirup et al., 2016).

One of the challenges that were talked about during the pandemic was how online learning can be distracting. Online learning requires electronic equipment, which can easily distract. which P-7 noted, "I study with my phone on the table; when a friend of mine texted me, it initiated a conversation that leads to disregarding my scheduled activities. P-5 added, "Oftentimes I open new tabs to view funny videos or browse social media. Students should

hide their smartphones while working and create a time management program to coordinate their studying, socializing, and free time to overcome this difficulty.

On the other hand, P-2 experienced that background noises and electrical equipment can hinder his online learning. P-13 further added that, "my younger siblings and other family members, pets, TV, and loud music disrupted my concentration during an online class. P-9 stressed that distractions aren't limited to the home: "Kids playing outside, neighbors having parties, noisy automobiles, and barking dogs distract my attention." Students can focus by using headphones.

Home problems vary by student. Time management and a regular regimen can help pupils overcome these obstacles. Success also requires motivation. Students can stay on track by considering their grades, graduation, and future careers. After studying or getting good scores, students may treat themselves with "adu istorbo iti aglawlaw nu googlemmeet kasla "Dagijay kapamilya mi, karruba mi, Dagijay agtatrabaho, Dagijay luglugaan," he said. "Isu han nak makafocus" (There are many disturbances around during virtual class on Google Meet, like our family members, neighbors, workers, and vehicles. That is why I cannot focus. This confirms the study of Joaquin et al. (2020) that the environment may not be conducive to online learning due to some disturbances. Even household chores or activities can become a source of contention because "agrabaho kami uneg ti balay, agluto, agdalus, we cook, we clean the house."

### **Opportunities and Benefits Realized During COVID-19**

There have been reports of difficulties or challenges with online distance education. However, there are also benefits or pleasant experiences. When college education students were asked what the COVID-19 pandemic had taught them as they continued their education, their remarks grouped into three categories: (a) commitment to complete academic work to attain goals, (b) a renewed willingness to learn the know-how of technology, and (c) opportunity to earn and save and the benefits of online distance learning.

In this topic, certain ideas and aspects of college education served as a wake-up call for students who were trying to finish their schoolwork and reach their goals in the middle of a pandemic. As with asynchronous learning, P-9 stressed that, "self-paced learning allows me to complete my academic requirements and tasks at my own pace," as P-15 stated that, "the pandemic gave me the chance to concentrate more on my homework," and I had plenty of time to complete things."

On the other hand, P-7's renewed interest in technology made him want to learn more about it. He said:

Not all of us were ready and equipped for online teaching and learning, and some of my professors still use email as a way to send and receive documents online. I've learned that it's important to not only keep up with the latest technologies but also be willing to learn how to use whatever platform is required of me in particular.

And "it is critical to understand how to use a variety of learning platforms and tools," added by P-1, and P-6 added, "I discovered how to make the best use of available resources," Jena (2020) has also recognized higher education institutions' efforts to support the continuity of teaching and learning, research activities, and other technologically oriented outputs.

Looking at COVID-19 as an opportunity to earn and save, participants 4 and P-11 said that, "this online-distance education is beneficial because I do not spend on (a) fares, (b) uniforms, (c) allowance for going to school, and d) paying rent to the boarding house," Though

it was claimed earlier that the purchase of load is costly, there is no denying that they have less expenditure overall due to the mentioned reasons, which corroborates with the studies of Bahasoan et al. (2020) found out that e-learning is cheaper in developing countries, and Ortagus and Derreth (2020), who regarded it as a response to the rising cost of "ay natiptipid gayam ti kastoy sir, internet ta awan pamasaha ken haan kami nagpadait uniform, awan pay daily nga allowance," said another participant and, "Yes, distance education is less expensive because we do not pay for transportation, do not purchase school uniforms, do not receive an everyday allowance, and do not rent a boarding place.

One of the best benefits of this distance education is the development of self-reliance in learning, as seven (7) of eight (8) participants had to start learning independently. Otherwise, they will not be able to cope: "Napilitan nak nga agbasa, agresearch ken agaramid iti activities ko nga maymaysak lang," one said. I had to read, do research, and do my activities on my own. "Awan unay amruk ag-internet ngem inadal ko tapnu makaiswela nak, itan ket amruk metten," said another. (I do not know much about the internet, but I had to learn because I want to continue studying; now I know.) This phenomenon brought something good or beneficial to students because they were forced to become self-reliant in their learning, which is the goal of education. Unlike during face-to-face classes, students rely too much on their teachers and classmates.

The next benefit might be a side effect, but it could help people who need to study on their own because five of the eight people who took the survey said they could work while looking. Hence, there are working students to support themselves, which would have been impossible in normal circumstances. "Mayat sir ta syak mismo mangpapaiskwela bagik ta adda sideline nga trabahok," one said (it is good sir because I am financially supporting myself because I work). This finding supports the study by Picciano et al. (2010) that college students cannot work and study simultaneously; otherwise, they will drop out.

Another benefit is being resourceful, which shows the participants' experiences in coping with the challenges of the situation. Students had to get creative when they couldn't connect to the internet and needed to keep going to school. Otherwise, their education will be compromised. P-10 said, "Magna kami pay adayo tapnu makadanun idiyay bantay nga addaan ti signal" (we must walk for several miles away to reach the hill where there is internet connectivity). Two of them said that "nagbordong kami ta awan internet idyay ayan mi" (we rent a boarding house because there is no internet connectivity in our place).

Self-learning was one of the significant benefits of online distance learning. For instance, when they said that they had to find ways to learn and cope with the challenges of distance education online, it necessarily follows that they had to be resourceful. Hence, they sacrificed going to places, especially on foot, where internet connectivity is present or better, or finding a boarding house to stay in places where connectivity is more vital. As a result of their resourcefulness, they became self-reliant. As a result, independent learners overcame their unfamiliarity with social media and web navigation through online distance education. Learning how to use the learning platform was the only choice for them.

## **Conclusion**

College Education students' learning experiences on the advent of online distance education is difficult during the COVID-19 pandemic. The epidemic has not only affected the education sector but also the economy and the health care system. Maintaining the education system through online distance education methods is a major achievement.

In the Philippines, college students have investigated several ways to lessen the effects of the pandemic. While some accepted the situation as normal and persisted with their routine responsibilities and online learning despite the lack of digital connectivity in rural areas, such

as relocating to urban areas because most cell towers in the Philippines are in affluent areas. In addition, it is necessary to note that technology and online accessibility are the greatest barrier faced by students in the advent of online distance education. Students have difficulty subscribing to paid resources because of the stability of internet access.

But COVID-19 has imparted to students the advantages of this pandemic. They identified several benefits of online learning, including its ability to give students flexibility, its ability to reduce educational costs, its ability to help participants appreciate the value of technology while reevaluating their values and reflecting on their studies, and its ability to help contextualize the study's questions. Due to the pandemic, learning mechanisms have changed in common ways, posing students with consistent and extensive tasks and experiences.

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