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## The phenomenon of learning at a distance through emergency remote teaching amidst the pandemic crisis

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**Abstract:** The threat brought about by Corona Virus or COVID-19 had made a huge impact not only on the economic, tourism, and health sectors, but it also hardly hit the education system of the world at large. Specifically, this pandemic crisis had caused the Philippine higher education institutions to abruptly shift to emergency remote teaching (ERT) as a response to the call for continued education despite the global health threat. Using a qualitative phenomenological research design, this paper discusses the lived experiences of five learners who were suddenly immersed in a remote learning context amidst the threat of COVID-19. There were four themes revealed in this study: poor to no internet access, financial constraints, lack of technological devices, and affective or emotional support. Interestingly, findings showed that learning remotely in these trying times is challenging because aside from the existing problems on access and affordability, the emerging concerns on financial stability and affective support contributed to interrupted learning engagement. Moreover, exposing culturally face-to-face learners in the context of ERT can put additional learning pressure. Nevertheless, the need to listen to the students' lived experiences in ERT will provide a lending ear to be heard and a voice for building a pedagogy of understanding about their learning journey in this time of pandemic crisis.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Emergency Remote Teaching, Emergency Remote Education, Enhanced Community Quarantine, Pandemic

### Introduction

Although the concepts of online learning (Anderson, 2008; Harasim, 2017; Horzum, 2017; Panigrahi, Srivastava & Sharma, 2018; Wang, Minku & Yao, 2018), open and distance education (Bozkurt, 2019; Jung, 2019; Simpson, 2018; Weller, Jordan, DeVries & Rolfe, 2018), and blended learning (Boelens, De Wever & Voet, 2017; Dziuban, Graham, Moskal, Norberg & Sicilia, 2018) have been slowly introduced to some Philippine colleges and universities, however, the issues of affordability and accessibility to some extent still impede wide range integration of technology in the context of education.

In the Philippines, the effect brought about by Corona Virus Disease 2019 or COVID-19 paved the way for schools to suspend and declare a state of public health emergency. Specifically, the Philippine Commission on Higher Education or CHED released COVID advisory no. 5 stating the cancellation of classes and school activities, including on-the-job-training and internships, from March 9-April 14, 2020. Nonetheless, the continued increase of local transmission cases resulted for the Philippine government to extend until the end of April 2020. This also led for CHED's issuance of advisory no. 6 that authorizes higher education institutions (HEIs), who are still using the June-March old school calendar, to immediately end the semester. Whereas, those schools that are aligned with the August-May new school calendar were given the autonomy to make judgments on the inclusion of flexible learning and other alternative means of teaching and learning delivery, such as ERT (synchronous and asynchronous learning tasks).

Although there are some HEIs in the country who are practicing blended learning (e.g., Lim, 2016; Mabuan & Ebron, 2016; Resurreccion, 2018), the use of ERT (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020) for almost half of the remaining semester in this critical period of our time created unique issues and concerns of students experiences. Therefore, more than the access to technological devices and the internet, it is significant to investigate the journey of learners who were prematurely immersed in a remote learning context. Through listening to their stories and giving voices from their experiences, we can picture out their lived through learning at a distance in these trying times.



## Literature

During the early years of technology conception in the Philippine education system, most of the educators are distant in using information and communication technology (ICT) tools, such as computers, because they think it will replace them soon in classrooms (Acosta, 2016). Educators felt that face-to-face interaction is still the core of teaching and learning environment where it provides a rich context of instruction than learning in an online environment (Arinto, 2007; Hill, Chidambaram, & Summers, 2013). Nevertheless, as it progresses towards the age of disruption in education (Al-Imarah & Shields, 2019; Andrade, 2018; Hopp, Antons, Kaminski, Oliver Salge, 2018; Quinney, Lamont, Biggins & Holley, 2017), some educators gradually embrace the idea of bringing technology in the learning environment. For instance, the case of the University of the Philippines – Open University, offers open and distance e-learning approach in reaching out to its learners. Compare to traditional face-to-face interaction, online learning provides flexibility (Daniel, 2016; Orr, Weller & Farrow, 2019; Stone, Freeman, Dymont, Muir & Milthorpe, 2019) which they can access learning resources regardless of time and distance. This also makes learning more convenient and conducive, for instance, to those who are residing in remote areas or working professionals.

There were also advocates of online learning that emphasize this approach as a more cost-effective (Renner, Laumer & Weitzel, 2014) wherein the instructional materials are sometimes made freely open for learners (e.g., Hilton, 2016; Jemni & Khribi, 2017; Ozdemir & Hendricks, 2017). Although the learning technologies are becoming part of instructional integration in a face-to-face classroom, it is also no doubt that in developing countries, like the Philippines, it possesses different challenges like accessibility and affordability (e.g., Roberts & Hernandez, 2019).

Take for example the case of the higher education system in Nigeria where despite having widespread usage of technologies in teaching and learning, the country is still lagged behind in the international digital parameter because it failed to integrate educational technology in the school curriculum (Njoku, 2018). It posits the need to see the significance of utilizing educational technologies to its full extent, such as inclusion in curriculum, considering that education delivery is moving through momentous changes.

To sum it up, while there is no doubt that some schools are in the modality of bringing physical classroom in the digital world, problems such as faculty's knowledge and skills in managing virtual learning environment possess great threat for learners, since they are mostly products of the traditional learning environment (de la Pena-Bandalaria, 2007). Compare to developed countries, the Philippines is also behind in the arena of ICT (Acosta, 2016) such as in terms of affordability and accessibility of technology devices, and educational technology curricula inclusion, innovation, implementation, and evaluation.

## Methodology

### Research design

In the pursuit to understand and explore the experiences of students learning journey in this time of pandemic crisis, this study uses a qualitative phenomenological research design. Essentially, it facilitates a deeper understanding of a certain phenomenon being lived through as described by the participants (Creswell, 2014; Giorgi, 2012). In this event, it is focused on addressing the lived experiences of five college students learning remotely amid of the global health threat.

The phenomenology claims that to understand human experiences, it requires immersive penetration of individual's thoughts and insights through employing interviews or extensive discussions (Creswell, 2009; Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). Since these were the actual lived through of the participants who have all experienced the phenomenon of learning remotely, it facilitates a culmination of interpretation of their experiences (Campbell, 2011; Creswell, 2009; Willis, 2007). For instance, it involves the actual establishment of meanings from the views of their lenses which is essential for the researchers to know deeply where the participants are coming from. Likewise, it provided the researcher to picture out the situation of my participants from the phenomenon they lived through based on their actual shared experiences (Creswell, 2014; Giorgi, 2012).

### Participants

Since this study was conducted during the time of pandemic crisis where the entire island of Luzon, Philippines was under enhanced community quarantine (ECQ), the selection of participants was based

on the availability of students in one of the top tier university in the country. Specifically, they were purposively chosen and contacted via online messaging. Although, there were around 12 participants who were considered to be part of this study, however, 7 of them refused to be interviewed due to personal and school-related circumstances and conflict with their time availability.

Table 1: Profile of participants

Participant	Year level	Area of residing during the time of pandemic crisis	Type of internet access
1	1	Residing with family	Home/wireless internet
2	2	Transient/living in dormitory	Mobile data
3	2	Transient/living in dormitory	Mobile data
4	1	Residing with family	Home/wireless internet
5	2	Transient/living in dormitory	Mobile data

The participants' profile as reflected in table 1 shows that majority of students were in sophomore year. Before the government declared ECQ, some students had the opportunity to leave the city of Manila, and back to their home provinces. Unfortunately, some students had been stuck in their respective dormitories. Since March 9, 2020, these students had no chance to be physically present with their family because the public transportation system was put under suspension as a preventive measure to contain the spread of COVID-19. Meanwhile, all of them claimed to have access to internet connection but the coverage status or internet speed has been reported to be weak or limited.

#### Data procedure and ethical considerations

Before the actual interview, the researcher arranged an initial meeting with the target participants through online messaging if they were willing to share their experiences in learning at distance through ERT in this time of global health threat. The researcher also took the opportunity to have some chitchat with them to gain their trust in this study and establish rapport for a smooth flow in collecting my data (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Doody & Noonan, 2013). Out of 12 target students to be part of this study, only 5 had confirmed to participate because of personal or family-related concerns and school tasks that needed to be accomplished.

Meanwhile, the researcher explained to the participants the overview and focus of this study which is geared toward investigating their experiences in ERT in this time of COVID-19 health threat. The ethical consideration, such as ensuring the anonymity of the participants throughout the course of study and informed consent, was also explained to them (Bricki & Green, 2007; Kaiser, 2009). The actual name of the participants was anonymized to secure their personal identity and confidentiality (e.g., participant 1 or P1). Likewise, it was explained to them that the interview process will be audio recorded for accurate transcription of data.

More so, an individual interview using video conferencing was initiated since the entire Luzon Island was under ECQ and physical mobilization was prohibited. The use of interview approach facilitated an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of the participants during these trying times (Kvale, 1996; Patton, 1987). It also helped the researcher to gather detailed thoughts and insights of the participants by employing one-on-one interviews (Gaskell, 2000; Sonesson, Boffard, Lundberg, Rydmark, & Karlgren, 2018). Additionally, during the actual interview, the researcher emphasized that there might be some instances that the details or information shared by them were not sufficient or lacking, hence, there would be a follow-up question for some participants to elicit information through online messaging. After the interview process, both parties agreed that all information will be kept confidential and stored in a protected password file. Further, all raw information was deleted after the findings were analyzed, presented, and/or published, all raw information was deleted to ensure privacy and confidentiality concerns.

#### Data Analysis

After transcribing the data in a Microsoft word sheet, the researcher read the entire initial transcripts to assess whether the collected data had saturated or there was still a need for follow-ups or clarification from some of the participants (Boyatzis, 1998). From there, transcripts were manually coded using Giorgi and Giorgi's (2003) descriptive phenomenological psychological analysis. For better visualization

and coding process, the researcher gradually transferred the transcripts from Microsoft word to excel spreadsheet. After a series of filling-out the gaps from the initial transcriptions, the researcher re-read the final transcribed descriptions of students' lived experiences about learning in ERT environment despite the country's impeding public health problem. Getting through this step provided the researcher the reflective moment to make sense of a whole from their shared insights and perspectives.

More so, the initial codes were translated into psychologically sensitive chunks of expressions to elicit a detailed representation of codes. In fact, to increase the credibility of my data, the researcher asked the feedback of the participants about the emergent codes presented (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2002). Aside from the feedback gathered from the participants, the researcher also presented the codes to his colleagues in the field which increases the trustworthiness of the data (Elliot, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999; Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). Thus, a refined general structure of themes of participants' experiences was reported in the findings of this study and discussed through the lenses from empirical or related studies (Theron, 2015).

### Findings

Four themes emerged in investigating the lived experiences of learners who were prematurely exposed to ERT. These themes were: poor to no internet access, financial constraints, lack of technological devices, and affective or emotional support.

The first theme that was reported talks about *poor to no internet access*. The majority of the participants described the notion of internet accessibility as a challenge rather than an advantage on their part. For them, access means being able to connect in a timely and quality network of connectivity. They emphasized that despite having a widespread increase in internet infrastructure, especially in urban areas of the country, it is no wonder that having reliable internet access is still far behind to achieve. Participant 1 (P1) expressed his disappointment because he cannot download the files which were necessary to comply in one of his courses. He also illustrated how bad his experiences during their synchronous ERT, to wit:

"It was really disappointing on our part because our wireless internet connection is a failure. I just want to share a story of our online class engagement last time. I am telling you, it was really terrible because of connectivity lag issues. I cannot even understand what my professor was explaining. It was all blurred. I don't think I can learn and survive online class at this very moment."

Further, participant 3 (P3) and participant 4 (P4) shared their thoughts that they had a nightmare submitting the due ERT assignments because of failure to connect in the internet. These instances made them agitated to search for other avenues for accessing files to be uploaded and downloaded.

"Since I am a transient student here in Manila, there were times that I can download and upload files easily, while most of the time, it was really difficult to connect in the internet. I remember there was an instance that we have to submit our online task in Canvas, and yeah, I requested my landlord if I could connect in the dormitory's internet connection, since I am just using mobile data." (P3)

"After the announcement of enhanced community quarantine in Metro Manila, I rushed to go home in our province in Cavite. As expected, I had a hard time to connect in our online platform. I don't know what the problem is. I mean we are in this COVID-19 threat, but I guess the internet providers should increase their connectivity bandwidth considering our schools comply us to continue engaging in different learning tasks." (P4)

The theme of *financial constraints* implies students' budgetary issues in managing their remaining savings which affect their learning compliance. Since the ECQ was in place and the majority of Filipino workers are considered to be daily wage earners, this resulted to no work, no pay scheme which affected some stranded students to budget their remaining allowances. In fact, some of them had borrowed money from their dorm mates just to sustain their necessities as well as buying mobile internet load to stay them connected in their continued learning tasks.

"I remember during the first day of government's declaration of enhanced community quarantine, I panicked knowing that I will be stranded in my dormitory and have to comply with the online learning tasks. My problem now is budget for internet connection. Considering we are under enhanced community quarantine, my dad was also asked by their company not to report from work until the government lift the lockdown. It also came to a point that I borrowed money from my dorm mate since she have extra money that time. I used the borrowed money to buy load for internet connection and buy goods." (P2)

In the same scenario, P5 recalled that being stuck in dormitories during these trying times was a difficult situation. Aside from ensuring to tie up their budget in essential things, such as foods, electricity, and water bills, they still have to give priority in making sure that their mobile phones have internet data to be connected in school and/or course learning announcements.

"I was stuck for almost two months now, and still have to comply with school requirements via Canvas. Although there were changes in submissions like providing us extensions, but I still have to set a budget for internet data. As you all know, prepaid internet load is quite expensive which makes it more difficult for us because our parents temporarily stopped from their work due to this crisis." (P5)

Additionally, the *lack of technological devices* was also reported by some participants. For P3, she shared that the use of a smartphone is not enough because some files are too large to handle. There was an instance where she asked her dorm mate if she can borrow her laptop for an hour or two just to comply with her pending learning tasks.

"There was this incident that I can no longer manage the files that I downloaded from our online platform, and so I asked my dorm mate, who that time was having siesta or nap. Luckily, she lend me her laptop for about two hours." (P3)

Additionally, P5 talked about her disappointment having been hopeless to comply with ERT activities because she cannot afford to buy a laptop for school purposes. P5 recalled that since the school was closed, she has no other option but to maximize and use her smartphone.

"Not all students are lucky or have the capability to afford a computer desktop or laptop. Since our school's e-library was closed as well as the nearby computer shops, there was no other way for me to manage my online learning tasks but simply to use my smartphone. It just saddens me that the school cannot understand the situation of their marginalized students in this time of pandemic." (P5)

The last theme that was perceived by almost all participants focuses on the need to have *affective or emotional support*. In this time of pandemic crisis, they expressed their voices that they do not want to be left behind. Considering some were stuck in dormitories, while others were at the comforts of their home, however, all of them were searching for emotional security and support. P1, P2, and P4 shared that learning amid public health emergency was not their priority because they feel that they have primary obligations to fulfill such as assuring that their families, relatives, and friends are healthy and secured against the threat of COVID-19.

"I cannot get the point that our school needs to continue learning in the middle of this COVID-19. We are not in normal times. What we need right now is to feel us safe, especially our families. My parents are old and I think they are considered vulnerable to acquire COVID. To be honest, I am having a hard time to process everything." (P1)

"Although our school gives us allowance to submit our learning requirements even after the school year, but I am not still comfortable to learn and comply at this very moment. I feel that I am not emotionally prepared to the so called new normal. I am all alone right now in dormitory, and I am having nightmares which hinders me to fulfill my school responsibilities. I really miss my family." (P2)



“It made me sick to think that COVID hinders me to learn. At this very moment, I don’t feel that I am safe. I don’t think that continuing to study our lessons in this time of crisis is necessary. I am mentally and emotionally stress right now.” (P5)

Likewise, they expressed their emotional concerns that as COVID-19 cases increase in the country, their learning concentration was also being disrupted. Some escape from these emotional struggles by chitchatting with friends and staying connected with families and loved ones. This, somehow, helped them to release emotional pressures.

“I wanted learn, but this virus made me anxious. Aside from ensuring that I am safe from this disease, I also stay connected with my parents and friends through sending text messages. Talking to them made me feel safe and sound.” (P3)

### Discussion

The untimely pandemic health crisis caused by COVID-19 paved the way for learning institutions, most especially in developing countries, to prematurely immerse their learners in an extreme learning situation through ERT. The first theme that was reported discusses the notion of poor to no internet access. This reflects that despite massive telecommunication infrastructures being undertaken in the Philippines, the issue of reliable and quality internet coverage is still far behind to achieve due to duopoly of telecommunications, geographical disparities and limited budget allocation in remote areas (Roberts & Hernandez, 2019; Vera & Bresnahan, 2017). While some scholars claim that the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century also starts the era of disruptive age (Al-Imarah & Shields, 2019; Andrade, 2018; Hopp et al., 2018; Quinney et al., 2017), many of the developing countries are still struggling (Acosta, 2016) to make ERT an accessible for everyone.

The shared lived experiences of learners about access is an evident of the current digital divide (Milakovich & Wise, 2019; Van Dijk, 2017) that has been experiencing in this time of the pandemic crisis. The gap between individuals who do have and who do not have internet access is widen. There were instances where students have to go to the convenience store to reload for a mobile data which is risky considering the stay at home policy of the government and the threat of COVID-19. Whereas, those students who have the internet access are much favorable to comply with the remote learning requirements than those who are struggling for an internet access. Aside from today’s reflection of the Philippine ICT, it is also noteworthy to discuss how education puts more emphasis on learning traditionally and setting aside the uniqueness of open and distance education. This pandemic justifies that a sudden shift from traditional classroom instruction to ERT can bring disaster on part of the students’ learning process. Regardless of whether the participant lives in an urban or rural area, having strong internet access is believed to be a challenge for everyone (e.g., Roberts & Hernandez, 2019; Vera & Bresnahan, 2017). Essentially, while higher education institutions continuously imposing their students to comply through synchronous or asynchronous tasks, it is significant to consider other modes of learning delivery, such as the use of modular-based, and not just only solely relying on the online platform.

Meanwhile, the theme of financial constraints reflects that learning in these trying times threatens the financial capability of every Filipino family. In the 2018 study reported by the Philippine Institute for Development Studies, it was emphasized that about 40% of the Philippine’s household income is considered to be a middle-income class, whereas low-income class comprises 58% of working households (Albert, Santos & Vizmanos, 2018). Nevertheless, these two income blocks are also the ones who were hardly hit by the COVID-19 crisis. The no work, no pay system hinders them to continue for a living which in return affects their lifestyle including sending financial support to their children. Consequently, the effect of implementing a nationwide ECQ made the economic activity paralyzed, thus, some families or even the student itself tend to borrow money just to sustain learning remotely.

This also calls for another theme that emerged in the findings that talks about the lack of technological devices. As a developing nation, even prior to this untimely global health threat, the problem of affordances to educational technological tools has been existing for quite some time (Wagner, 2018). In the 2017 report of Philippine Statistics Authority, it was revealed that only 22% of Filipino households have a computer device. Needless to say, this issue puts additional purchasing pressure on part of the consumer to afford these technological devices. In this time of pandemic crisis, where learning is believed that it can be accessed through an online platform, hence, it emphasizes that only the privileged

students can have the opportunity to learn at a distance. Those who are lacking the right technological devices might be left behind. This narrates the stories shared by some participants that despite movements for inclusivity, the chain of technological affordability holds some students back towards learning opportunities for all.

More importantly, in this time of COVID-19 phenomenon, students are no longer focused on learning and getting passing marks on their courses because they are socio-emotionally disturb and interrupt. They are searching for safety and security in this time of pandemic crisis. Needless to say, beyond school compliance, they are longing for affective or emotional support. Regardless of whether they are stranded or not, it is believed that support from family, faculty, and school management is highly regarded as an essential escape from this pandemic phenomenon. This posits that aside from content-based learning, schools must also respond to the call for providing psychological or emotional presence to their students (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Carver, 2020).

The faculty members should step-up and let the student feel their socio-emotional presence especially in this difficult period of our generation. For instance, they could ask their students if they are still doing well and what learning remedies or alternatives they could agree as a class, and not just a one-way ERT approach. Significantly, since we are not in a normal situation, learning should not be highly regarded as a matter of grades and content-based, but pedagogy of compassion and care must be present all the time (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020).

### **Conclusion and Suggestions**

Although the findings of this study do not intend to make generalizations, nonetheless, lending my ears and listening to the shared lived experiences of the students in learning remotely provides opportunities in voicing out their learning journey in these trying times. Also, the findings of these experiences from the perspectives of learners showed a glimpse that continued learning in the middle of COVID-19 phenomenon requires collaborative understanding, support, and compassion. Likewise, a sudden shift from a fully traditional learning environment to ERT is considered to be problematic and suicidal. It is no wonder that prior to this untoward event, the existence of issues on accessibility and affordability has been a nationwide problem. Therefore, immersing learners from a culturally face-to-face design together with impending issues on reliable internet coverage, high cost of technological devices, and financial constraints can cause learning disruptions.

Hence, this suggests the need for academic policymakers, such as the Philippine Department of Education and Commission on Higher Education, to create ways in making learning inclusive and accessible for all. For instance, the ERT delivery should not be confined synchronously, but they can also make innovations like asynchronous teaching and/or worksheets/modular approach. Likewise, higher education institutions should consider where the students are coming from. We might have different walks in life, but this pandemic knows no status. Listening to the students' experiences and giving voice to the unheard are essential in rethinking academic policies. As for a new normal in education, it would be essential if the colleges and universities will allocate budget for faculty training in teaching remotely. Additionally, the need to invest in different modes of instructional designs will also be integral, especially during trying times, to ensure proactive movements in instructional innovations and teachers' training and development. Lastly, I believe it would also be essential to examine the lived experiences of academic staff who taught at a distance in this time of global health crisis to determine as well the challenges and lessons they had learned from ERT. This might help the academic policymakers and institutional academic managers to determine the extent of both students and academic staff's experiences during the pandemic crisis which would, somehow, can serve as one of the bases of comparison in crafting a model or framework for teaching and learning at a distance.

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