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Difficulties in Remote Learning: Voices of Philippine University Students in the Wake of COVID-19 Crisis

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Abstract: Most educational systems across the world have migrated to remote learning modality as a measure against the spread of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). This phenomenon is causing a lot of difficulties especially as voiced out by students in the context of developing countries. This paper attempts to describe the difficulties in remote learning of university students in the Philippines in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis. Following a mainly qualitative research design, this study surveyed a pool of purposively and conveniently selected students currently enrolled in a tertiary institution. The result of the content analysis revealed the following categories of difficulties in remote learning: unstable internet connectivity; inadequate learning resources; electric power interruptions; vague learning contents; overloaded lesson activities; limited teacher scaffolds; poor peer communication; conflict with home responsibilities; poor learning environment; financial related problems; physical health compromises; and mental health struggles. Based on the result, cogent recommendations are discussed at the end of the study.

Keywords: difficulties, remote learning, university students, COVID-19 crisis, Philippines

Introduction

The coronavirus disease (COVID) 2019 crisis has impacted not only the economic, psychological, and social aspects of the world but also particularly, the educational sector to a great extent. The virus, which first emerged in December 2019, became a pandemic leading to school closures and eventually, migration to remote learning by all levels of educational institutions in the new normal education. Thus, the traditional delivery of instruction in education has transformed and in turn, learning spaces were re-organized.

To respond to the challenge of innovating educational delivery mechanisms in higher education, colleges and universities across the globe ventured into different practices such as distance education, online teaching, remote learning, blended learning, and mobile learning. These practices can be collectively called emergency remote education (ERE). It is the temporary change in the delivery of instruction caused by the sudden occurrence of a crisis. ERE does not mean going away from the traditional arrangement of the instructional process nor creating a completely new educational system. It provides a temporary feasible alternative for education practitioners to perform instruction and provide students with necessary instructional support (Hodges et al., 2020). ERE is also a branch of distance education, however, treated as an 'option' not 'obligation' in this time of crisis (Bozkurt et al., 2020). Furthermore, ERE enables the making the most of available resources including a wide range of technologies that offer capabilities for remote learning. It is also emphasized that, in this case, ERE is the best term to describe education during this interruption and is not the same as those distance education practices long before (Bozkurt et al., 2020). Considering current COVID-19 crisis, World Bank (2020) emphasized that education systems must make use of ERE and prepare if needed, different learning delivery modalities to ensure that students are engaged and can continue their learning. On the



other hand, the sudden shift of educational delivery also presents the other side of the coin for most students who are already disadvantaged long before the pandemic.

On a global scale, UNICEF (2020) reported that more than 1.5 billion learners of all ages are affected because of the school and university closures. Shutdowns have put youth in a disproportionate state. With utmost consideration to provide education as a fundamental human right, educational systems around the globe were once again challenged to produce different measures to immediately sustain education efforts (UNESCO, 2020), but this does not consider giving solutions to the problems of every particular student. Generally, the education system seems unprepared and may transpire unpredicted consequences during and beyond the crisis (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020).

Meanwhile, after the “no vaccine, no face to face classes” declaration by President Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) issued directives to universities to start preparing for distance learning. Thus, universities across the country are forced to close indefinitely. Classes in various universities already opened just these past few months and remote learning are faced with multiple challenges (Mateo, 2020) which later became difficult to handle by Filipino university students. Complicating this picture even is the fact that, not every student can provide and adapt to the rapid advances of technology in today’s digital age (Alvarez, 2020) especially for developing countries like the Philippines in which education is plagued by problems even before the pandemic.

In this Philippine context, remote learning reveals a digital divide among Filipino students (Santos, 2020). This current situation in remote learning may most possibly exacerbate existing inequalities and may translate to barriers in online learning. For example, a cross-sectional study conducted nationwide reported that thirty-two percent (32 %) and twenty-two percent (22%) out of 3, 670 Filipino medical students surveyed have difficulties adjusting to new learning styles and do not have reliable internet access, respectively (Baticulon et al., 2020). For some, it may present difficulty to purchase a facilitative learning device to easily tune in to online classes and immediately turn in assignments in the online system (Santos, 2020). Despite the efforts to make education accessible for all, many difficulties are still confronting Filipino university students in the practice of distance education.

Several studies have been conducted to report the stress (e.g. AlAteeq, Alijhani & AlEesa, 2020; and Baloran, 2020) and challenges encountered by students in virtual learning spaces in their respective countries (e.g. Adnan & Anwar, 2020 in Pakistan; Arinto, 2016 in the Philippines; Henaku, 2020 in Ghana; Matswetu, et al., 2020 in Zimbabwe; Subedi et al., 2020 in Nepal; and Dhawan, 2020 in India). A most recent comprehensive study including 31 countries (Bozkurt et al., 2020) was also conducted to look at how the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted the education arena across the globe. This multi-country study significantly reported reflections, lessons learned, and suggestions on how to navigate education in this time of uncertainty. With the goal in mind to help authorities come up with better responses to education, this study endeavors to provide a piece of evidence in the context of a developing country as regards the difficulties experienced by Filipino university students. If this inquiry will be addressed, lessons can be drawn and may eventually open windows for relevant actions.

Thus, this study aimed to describe the difficulties in remote learning of university students in the Philippines in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis.

Methodology

This section presents the methods used in this study. It includes the research design, study participants, data collection, and data analysis. They are discussed as follows.

Research Design

This paper is mainly carried out as qualitative research. Creswell (2013) noted that qualitative research is typically employed in investigating an area of interest where not much has been known about a phenomenon. This implies that qualitative research is less concentrated on testing hypotheses, but the description, analysis, and interpretation of a given phenomenon.

Furthermore, this present study specifically adapts a descriptive approach to qualitative research. Gummesson (1991) explained that descriptive research describes the fundamental characteristics of a phenomenon at a given period. This design is suited to this study as it attempts to describe the difficulties in remote learning of university students in the Philippines during the COVID-19 time.

Study Participants

This study involved a group of purposively and conveniently selected 32 Filipino students enrolled in a higher education institution during the school year 2020-2021. The participants were selected based on their ability to provide the needed information and their connectivity at the time of the conduct of this study. They were chosen regardless of their age, sex, course standing, economic status, and geographical location.

Furthermore, it should be noted that this sample does not represent the entire population, but it is considered acceptable to demonstrate the purpose of this study. The researchers do not intend to generalize the results but to qualitatively describe the difficulties in remote learning of university students amid the current COVID-19 crisis.

Data Collection

The data were collected using an electronic survey method through Google Form from October 26 to 30, 2020. An electronic survey is a practical data collection method. According to Andrews et al. (2003), it can be designed in numerous online programs, saves energy typically demanded in long surveys and gathers both quantitative and qualitative information. The electronic survey in this study consisted of open-ended questions regarding the difficulties in remote learning of students amid the COVID-19 emergency.

The online survey in this study was done by first, asking the consent of the target participants. The researchers explained that considering the current situation, their involvement is not compulsory. It was also stressed that if they participate, their identity will remain anonymous and their responses will be analyzed. The link to the online questionnaire was posted on the discussion board of a learning management system.

Data Analysis

A technique called content analysis was employed in this study. It is the process of a thorough inspection of data sources generated across an extensive collection of practices stored in different forms such as written words and images (Jupp, 2006). The process of content analysis in this paper involved stages of repetitive exploration of the gathered data.

First, the researchers carefully organized the downloaded transcript of all the responses of the participants. The analysis of the raw data provided the initial identification of the relevant codes. These relevant codes were then transferred in a separate file. The researchers continuously evaluated these codes, noting their similarities and differences to eventually group them. Based on the groups of similar codes, the categories were developed and structured to answer the central questions of this research.

Results

This paper was guided by its purpose to describe the difficulties in remote learning of Philippine university students amid the COVID-19 crisis. This section presents the results as follows. The result is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Difficulties of students in remote learning

Selected Codes	Category
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>I live in a remote area, so, it is hard for me to find a stable internet connection. It is hard to keep in touch to the events like Google meetings, Messenger discussions.</i> <i>I go to other village for 20 mins just to have access. The road is so hard, and we need to cross five rivers. I miss some quizzes because there are times when the connection is lost suddenly.</i> <i>It rains here that cause of lack of internet connection. It takes 30 mins to 1 hour sometimes before I open my Moodle. Sometimes I climb in our rooftop in order to send my activities.</i> 	Unstable internet connectivity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>I would need laptop and printer to study and really accomplish my requirements well.</i> <i>I actually borrow the phone of my cousin because. I have an old phone, but it is difficult to access internet with it.</i> <i>Not enough space in phone memory due to applications like Zoom, Moodle, Google Meet, and Adobe Reader.</i> 	Inadequate learning resources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>There is a power interruption in our village for almost 7 hours every once or twice a week.</i> <i>We often experience unanticipated and sudden electricity interruptions.</i> 	Electric power interruptions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>How much we try to listen to the Google Meet but still we cannot understand the lesson.</i> <i>Having a hard time understanding the module, and some instructions are not clear to me.</i> <i>The modules without any further discussion of instruction which causes confusion.</i> 	Vague learning contents
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>There are so many submissions like one to three activities in a subject every week. The daily activities are different from the weekly activities.</i> <i>I am overwhelmed with so many tasks or activities from different subjects. It is overloaded.</i> <i>There are lots of activities that I ended up just answering the activities in the module and did not study the lesson at all.</i> 	Overloaded lesson activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>There are some of the professors who seemed cannot be approached when we have concerns.</i> <i>We cannot reach our professor, so the ending is we pass the wrong answer or format.</i> <i>And some professors think that theirs are the only subjects we enrolled with.</i> 	Limited teacher scaffolds
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>I also have difficulty with the poor cooperation of others in the group activities given.</i> <i>When there are group activities, I end up doing most of the tasks that I need to sacrifice my other subjects.</i> <i>I do not have anyone to ask from my classmates because I know they are also struggling.</i> 	Poor peer communication
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>We cannot entirely have our full focus studying since we still have responsibilities at home.</i> <i>I also have all the responsibilities here at home. It does not mean that we are at home we have all the time.</i> <i>Since I am here at our house there are times when I cannot focus because I also need to help do the chores.</i> 	Conflict with home responsibilities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Whenever I go to the internet shop, I get distracted with the noise in the surroundings.</i> <i>There is no proper space for learning at home. I cannot focus and concentrate.</i> 	Poor learning environment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>I do not have financial assistance for the internet load that I needed for the online class.</i> <i>I also encounter financial problem since it is pandemic, and it is hard to find job to support my learning needs.</i> <i>I still ask money to my parents since there are no extra job that I can attend.</i> 	Financial related problems
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>I face my phone the entire day and even until midnight to do the task and it causes me eye strain and headache.</i> <i>My eyes hurt sometimes because I use my phone and laptop for almost 15 hours a day.</i> <i>Most of the time the 4G signal is around 11 PM, so I lose sleep to submit and download my activities.</i> 	Physical health compromises
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Thinking about the difficult lessons, packed schedules, and slow internet without somebody to talk around makes me feel sick.</i> <i>Then there are times when I cry because I do not know which activity to finish and submit first.</i> <i>Sometimes I experience lack of focus and motivation and I nurture the idea of giving up.</i> 	Mental health struggles

Category 1: Unstable internet connectivity. One of the most recurring difficulties experienced by the students in remote learning is unstable internet connectivity. Most of the time, this problem is caused by

the geographic location (“I live in a remote area, so, it is hard for me to find a stable internet connection. It is hard to keep in touch to the events like Google meetings, Messenger discussions” -Student 13). At other times, it is compounded by the weather (It rains here that cause of lack of internet connection. It takes 30 mins to 1 hour sometimes before I open my Moodle. Sometimes I climb in our rooftop in order to send my activities” -Student 21).

Category 2: Inadequate learning resources. Another difficulty that repetitively appears in the responses of the students is the inadequacy of learning resources. Most students use only phone and need other resources (“I would need laptop and printer to study and really accomplish my requirements well” -Student 19). Others have a challenge in terms of the storage capacity of their available gadgets (“Not enough space in phone memory due to applications like Zoom, Moodle, Google Meet, and Adobe Reader -Student 07).

Category 3: Electric power interruptions. Furthermore, since remote learning relies on electronic gadgets in this context, the students were challenged with electricity interruptions. This is especially difficult in areas where regular interruptions occur (“There is a power interruption in our village for almost 7 hours every once or twice a week” -Student 21) or such interruptions are unexpected (“We often experience unanticipated and sudden electricity interruptions” -Student 08).

Category 4: Vague learning contents. The students also disclosed that a difficulty they encounter in remote learning is the vague lesson contents. This seems to stem not from the delivery mode but from the content itself (“How much we try to listen to the Google Meet but still we cannot understand the lesson” -Student 07). They also have difficulty when it comes to the written instruction in the module (“Having a hard time understanding the module, and some instructions are not clear to me” -Student 10).

Category 5: Overloaded lesson activities. The students further indicated that they have difficulties in remote learning due to overloaded lesson activities. There are daily and weekly activities per subject (“There are so many submissions like one to three activities in a subject every week. The daily activities are different from the weekly activities” -Student 27). This difficulty sometimes loses the learning value of the lesson (“There are lots of activities that I ended up just answering the activities in the module and did not study the lesson at all -Student 10).

Category 6: Limited teacher scaffolds. Moreover, the students articulated that they receive partial learning scaffolds from some of their professors. They perceived that some professors cannot be approached (“There are some of the professors who seemed cannot be approached when we have concerns” Student 02) or reached (“We cannot reach our professor, so the ending is we pass the wrong answer or format” -Student 26).

Category 7: Poor peer communication. The students also have difficulties in remote learning in terms of communicating with their classmates. This difficulty occurs especially in group activities (“I also have difficulty with the poor cooperation of others in the group activities given” -Student 27). Other students feel hesitant to ask their classmates (“I do not have anyone to ask from my classmates because I know they are also struggling” -Student 04).

Category 8: Conflict with home responsibilities. While the home may present comfort, students voiced difficulty with balancing and home responsibilities and remote learning. It keeps their time divided (“I also have all the responsibilities here at home. It does not mean that we are at home we have all the time” -Student 02). Home responsibilities affect their focus (“We cannot entirely have our full focus studying since we still have responsibilities at home” -Student 03).

Category 9: Poor learning environment. The students likewise expressed difficulties in remote learning when it comes to their learning environment. Especially for students who need to go to internet

shops, they get distracted (“Whenever I go to the internet shop, I get distracted with the noise in the surroundings” -Student 08). They also do not find their homes a conducive place to study (“There is no proper space for learning at home. I cannot focus and concentrate” -Student 13).

Category 10: Financial related problems. Furthermore, the students have difficulty with remote learning in terms of its financial demands. It requires internet expenses (“I do not have financial assistance for the internet load that I needed for the online class” -Student 17). Even if they have the choice to take a job to support their studies, they cannot because of the current situation (“I also encounter financial problem since it is pandemic, and it is hard to find job to support my learning needs” -Student 32).

Category 11: Compromised physical health. The students encounter difficulties in remote learning to the point that they feel they are sacrificing their physical health. They report eye strain and headache due to exposure to the gadgets (“I face my phone the entire day and even until midnight to do the task and it causes me eye strain and headache” -Student 7). They also expressed that they are deprived of enough time to take a physical rest (“Most of the time the 4G signal is around 11 PM, so I lose sleep to submit and download my activities” -Student 21).

Category 12: Mental health struggles. Lastly, the students feel difficulties in the form of mental struggles brought by the demands of remote learning. They sometimes overthink and end up feeling sick (“Thinking about the difficult lessons, packed schedules, and slow internet without somebody to talk around makes me feel sick -Student 13). At other times, they entertain the idea of concession (“Sometimes I experience lack of focus and motivation and I nurture the idea of giving up” -Student 12).

Discussion

The sudden migration of education from traditional on-campus learning to remote learning has put students at a great disadvantage. While universities already had great successes in establishing online learning systems for their students, it has been recognized that this transition to a new educational paradigm for most universities has not been properly organized. Thus, the intention of this paper is inspired by its purpose to describe the difficulties in remote learning as voiced out by Filipino students in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis.

Consistent with previous studies (e.g. see Bao, 2020; Henaku, 2020; Entsie, 2020; Wisconsin, 2020; and Baticulon et al., 2020), the participants of this research similarly voiced out unstable internet connectivity as one of the main difficulties they encounter in the practice of remote learning. The poor network is commonly a major problem for developing countries with telecommunication systems and ICT, not being properly developed (Aboagye et al., 2020). Although there are many existing internet bundles in the country, they are “fluctuating” and are not created equally in terms of speed and stability (Amadora, 2020).

Meanwhile, the findings of the studies (e.g. Coleman, 2011; and Henaku, 2020) corroborate the other result of this study in which inadequate learning resources are among the difficulties confronting the students. This result may imply that students cannot completely participate in and benefit from remote learning. This also confirms the finding of Saavedra (2020) that access to remote learning devices like computers has been a recurring challenge for students as schools shift to online distance learning in the middle of a global health emergency. This problem may stem from financial-related problems as another difficulty disclosed by student participants. This finding is the same as that of Matswetu et al., (2013) in which students in Zimbabwe faced financial problems in a distance learning set-up. The current crisis has made it even more difficult for the students surveyed who articulated difficulty in finding a job to support their learning needs. Noteworthy, in the Philippines, financial struggles have started to worsen for poor families during the outbreak due to an unprecedented economic shutdown (Adle, 2020).

Consequently, the student participants also voiced out electric power interruptions as another challenge in remote learning. Power outage during online classes is an inevitable problem in virtual classroom set-ups (Castillo, 2020). This is true for some students surveyed located in areas where power interruption has long been a problem since the pre-pandemic period. The same finding was gained from studies (e.g. Sarwar et al., 2020; Subedi et al., 2020; and Verawardina et al., 2020) in which students situated in deep rural areas find it difficult to stay connected with online learning due to interruption to even lack electricity. Vague learning content has also become a difficulty. According to them, this does not stem from the delivery mode but from the content itself. This could be attributed to the notion that, although university professors implemented online classes, most of them still used learning content meant for on-campus learning. For example, students are given syllabus and modules, however, some instructions in these materials are unclear and are not attainable for an online learning set-up. This may also stem from teachers' lack of experience in remote learning (Chen et al., 2020), thus giving them a hard time to produce appropriate supplementary materials specifically designed for online teaching platforms (Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020).

Overloaded lesson activities were also expressed by the students. As mentioned by them, a teacher would require them almost three activities in a subject, thus giving them less time to carefully answer them all. This difficulty in remote learning has been confirmed in the study of Sundarasan et al., (2020) where university students in Malaysia expressed stress about the overwhelming number of assignments required by the teachers. Their findings also revealed that this difficulty had a huge impact on the stress and anxiety levels of the students. The same experience was also reported by Sarvestani et al., (2019) where students complain about the extensive volume and the large number of modules that they need to answer.

Whereas, gaining teacher support is essential for students' learning. However, for the students surveyed, it is still a difficulty, thus resulting in limited teacher scaffolds. At times, teachers' expectations from students can be hard to meet which made them hard to approach. This difficulty could also be affiliated with the fact that some universities do not have a proper functioning e-learning operations system designed to support students with online library materials and a learning support system (Kerres, 2020). These may be available, but teachers also had challenges in operating the system and in facilitating online learning (Wang et al., 2020), thus making it hard for students. Just like on-campus learning, remote learning also needs social interaction and the exchange of ideas. However poor peer communication has been sought from the student participants. Studies (e.g. see Baticulon et al., 2020; and Sarvestani et al., 2020) discovered that students are having a hard time coping with remote learning because of the poor communication between them. They further posited that social issues like this influences the students' motivation and intention to study online. A study by Gaur, Sharma & Mudgal (2020) similarly discovered that nursing online classes lacked discussion among students brought about by COVID-19 lockdowns.

Consequently, a poor learning environment is detrimental for students to comfortably participate in remote learning. This difficulty has been repetitively revealed in students' responses. Establishing a positive and conducive learning space has long been a problem in distance education especially in most poor households (Baticulon et al., 2020). If this problem occurs, study productivity and the utmost concentration of students are at stake (Chang & Fang, 2020). The sudden migration to remote learning in the middle of a health crisis has overlooked an unconducive learning environment, which may affect the performance of students. Moreover, students voiced out the challenge that remote learning schedules conflict with their home responsibilities. This disruption usually happens in remote learning because students need to participate in doing household chores. This problem may influence university students' academic performance as shown by previous studies where students' involvement in household responsibilities negatively affects their academic achievement (e.g. see Poncian, 2017; and Amali, Bello & Adeoye, 2018).

Another concern of students is their compromised physical health. Students spend almost the entire day for online classes and answering activities, thus giving them less time or no time to engage in physical activities. This issue has been similarly raised by students in Malaysia where they experience strains of attending 6 to 8 hours of online classes, which further worsen their stress level (Sundarasan et al., 2020). Lastly, the issue of mental health struggles was unveiled by the students surveyed. Building rapport and maintaining relationships is crucial for positive mental well-being. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a “social recession” (Sundarasan et al., 2020), which created prolonged social distancing patterns, thus, making emotional support probably impossible at this state. This concern is further raised in studies (e.g. Tandon, 2020; Rajkumar, 2020; and Baticulon et al., 2020) which highlighted that COVID-19 related mental health issues including depression, stress, and anxiety impacted students’ motivation in online learning.

Conclusion

This paper attempted to describe the difficulties in remote learning of university students in the context of the Philippines amid the COVID-19 crisis. Based on the results, twelve themes were revealed: unstable internet connectivity; inadequate learning resources; electric power interruptions; vague learning contents; overloaded lesson activities; limited teacher scaffolds; poor peer communication; conflict with home responsibilities; poor learning environment; financial related problems; physical health compromises; and mental health struggles.

This result provides contextual pieces of evidence on the multifaceted challenges that confront students in a developing country amid the current global crisis. It is recommended that these difficulties should be considered as inputs for the further development of the current educational process. Specifically, the government officials should lobby for the improvement of technology and electricity access, especially in remote communities. This move will hopefully narrow the perceived digital disparities across different geographical locations and financial backgrounds. The school administrators should also adopt measures to enhance support to students in all aspects. An essential aspect that may not be covered in remote learning is the psychological aspect of learning, which should be provided attention by the teachers. On the other hand, teachers should reconsider their instruction as far as the contents and activities are concerned as students find issues in these elements. An instructional evaluation may also be periodically done to assist learners who are learning behind. Lastly, parents need to be practically involved in arranging the learning time and space of their children. They should likewise provide all the needed support so that students will eventually survive in this remote education amid the crisis.

This study acknowledges its limitation of being conducted to a small sample using a single method. Hence, for future researchers, large surveys should be conducted to further understand the difficulties of the students across levels. As qualitative research, the result of this work is also sensitive to its context. Thus, it should only be applied as far as the social, cultural, and educational context of this research is concerned.

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