ARE WE STRATEGICALLY COPING WITH FLEXIBLE LEARNING? INSIGHTS FROM 'FRONTLINERS' IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract
At this time of pandemic, people will have to co-exist with the COVID-19. The need to 'strategically' cope with this inevitable situation still remains to be explored in various depths, most especially in the area of education during flexible teaching and learning. Using Focus Group Discussion and other forms of instrumentation, this qualitative study found that both teachers and students as 'frontliners' employed coping strategies including acceptance, building strong and solid social support, cultivating self-reliance and resourcefulness, practicing self-discipline, and establishing an academic support community. While being challenged with technology, teachers still managed to deliver instruction by sourcing out free and credible teaching references, embracing teaching alternatives, and upgrading their technological capabilities. By post-pandemic, these coping strategies will have implications for sustainable instruction for young and adult learners, including those with special needs in the Philippines and in other parts of the world.

Keywords: COVID-19, Coping Strategies, Flexible Learning, Frontliners, Philippines

INTRODUCTION

While the threat of Covid-19 still cripples most activities of the world, education must continue. Many public and private universities embraced the alternative or remote teaching modalities, both synchronous and asynchronous, where students and teachers are required to battle the semester using online or offline platforms or a combination of these (The HEAD Foundation, 2020). The Flexible Learning-Teaching (FLT) mode of instruction has been the "sought-after" modality since the implementation of the new normal in the education system. It offers learners rich learning choices from multiple study dimensions and provides a suitable range of how and where students can access learning materials (Goode et al., 2007). As an alternative method during these trying times, Pangasinan State University has also adopted Flexible Learning (FL) as its mode of instruction. Operationally, FL is defined as the use of a combination of available and accessible learning modalities with greater emphasis on the students' resources (PSU, 2020).

However, with this sudden shift in the delivery of instruction, teachers and students alike are faced with the dilemma and challenges of adapting to the current trend of teaching and learning delivery (Aboagye et al., 2020). On top of health security, teachers and students are confronted with a litany of concerns - from financial, emotional, social, mental, psychological, and even intellectual aspects- making the teaching-learning process challenging (Rotas et al., 2020). Also, the new mode requires great adjustments from both teachers and students, which directly affect the success of the teaching-learning activity and would lead to the students' satisfactory academic performance.

Several studies have been conducted with the aim of shedding light to the problems encountered by students (Anderson, 2020; Hamza et al., 2020) and faculty members (Agayon, 2022; Bayram, 2021; Castroverde et al., 2021) in the new normal education and the coping strategies they have employed to continue pursuing education amidst these challenging times (Baloran, 2020; Gong, 2020, Green et al., 2020; Klapproth et al., 2020; Petronzi & Petronzi, 2020). While numerous literature points toward the explanation of the problems and the coping strategies employed during the new normal education, few researches were conducted focusing on the dilemmas faced by students and teachers on the specific teaching and learning modalities implemented. There is a need to identify the coping strategies of both teachers and students during flexible learning and teaching to ascertain the extent that we are still delivering quality instruction while not being negatively affected by the effects of the COVID-19, and when found effective during this time, these coping strategies could serve as baseline strategies for a more responsive and sustainable instruction for young learners, adult learners, most especially to those with special needs.

METHODOLOGY

This study is basically a Creswell's (2013) descriptive-phenomenological type of qualitative research in order to investigate the perceptions, thoughts and feelings of the participants, which in this study collectively referred to as 'frontliners' (i.e. teachers and students) since they are in the frontline of the education services. Fourteen (14) participants (i.e. 7 students, 7 faculty members) were purposively sampled to participate in a series of Focus Group Discussion conducted virtually. Their attributes as

participants were carefully considered to provide insights into the problem at hand with the most appropriate representation at the time of data-collection. To analyze transcripts from the FGD, Braun's (2013) six-step framework of Thematic Analysis was performed by the researchers, and members of the committee of the School of Advanced Studies, Pangasinan State University. Finally, Creely's (2016) phenomenological reduction was also conducted to identify and juice out the most profound, necessary, and substantial structures among the data corpora.

FINDINGS

Problems Encountered by Students as 'Education Frontliners'

Pedagogy and Content-related Struggles. Students were greatly challenged in their academics. The current learning setup limits them in performing necessary tasks required of their courses, most specifically for practical and laboratory subjects. One student has also pointed out that "he was not learning in the current setup," which emphasizes students' great ordeal in studying.

Learning Style-related Problems. Students were greatly challenged by the sudden shift in learning setup. They have been accustomed to the traditional way of learning where "teachers teach, and students listen" in a physical classroom. Hence, this abrupt change also required them to shift their learning style from being "teacher-dependent" to being "self-dependent" in a distance learning setup. While the FLT Mode of Instruction includes online teaching as the medium of instruction delivery, some students still struggle studying without physically interacting with their teachers and classmates.

Mental-Health Struggles. With the multitude of challenges that the pandemic presented, studying in the current setup posits another drop of anxiety on the part of the students. Some were "burnt-out" with their studies as they needed to juggle between studying and "surviving" this pandemic.

Unconducive Learning Environment. Learning environment plays a crucial role in the success of students' learning. If the environment is conducive, learning will likely take place if compared in an unconducive setting. However, with the current scenario where students are confined in their homes, the learning activity is disrupted by many factors- from doing their household responsibilities to securing a learning space free from any form of distractions.

Financial-related Problems. Alongside the health security, which concerns the whole world, the issue of financial stability is also a major problem. Students are not exempted from this setback. They belong to families whose members have been laid off from work or whose business went off because of the worldwide chaos. Thus, students also suffer financially. They needed to pay for mobile data and internet connection fees, which are costly. They also needed to purchase gadgets that could meet the specifications required for running the LMS software for their online class.

LMS Manipulation Struggles. One of the greatest adjustments that the students had to make was to familiarize themselves in manipulating their Learning Management System (LMS), which is the MS Teams. Although the students were digital natives, they still had a hard time learning the features of the LMS. They were challenged to turn in their assignments or activities and take quizzes and examinations.

Problems Encountered by Teachers as 'Education Frontliners'

Technology-related Problems. Teachers were not exempted from experiencing horrors when utilizing technology in their virtual classrooms. During their synchronous discussions, teachers faced many dilemmas, from intermittent internet connections to experiencing technical issues in managing their Learning Management System (MS Teams).

Inadequate Teaching Resources. Teachers were challenged to provide tools that they could use to make their classrooms engaging. Given that physical interaction is not possible in the Flexible Learning and Teaching setup, making every discussion engaging is a daunting task for teachers. While the current Learning Management System has features like emoticons that could allow virtual interaction, online learning tools are seen as necessary. However, teachers have difficulty availing these tools because of their "too costly subscription fee," as stated by one of the teacher-respondents.

Student-related Problems. Teachers were challenged on how to handle students in the current setup, given that they couldn't interact with them physically. Students were demotivated and lacked initiative. They were non-participative in virtual class discussions, and some were late in submitting their requirements. In addition, many teachers claimed that students' outputs were mostly copied from the internet or duplicated from other students' works.

Time-Management. With the complexities of the current learning and teaching setup, teachers were faced with time-management issues. Preparation of the Flexible Learning Materials (FLMs) consumes most of their time; thus, other topics were not covered.

Coping Strategies Employed by Students during Flexible Learning

Acceptance. CoVid-19 is an unforeseen enemy. Everyone was caught off guard, even in the field of academe. Students have coped with the situation by internalizing that the implementation of the FLT mode of instruction is a mitigating mechanism for them to continue education even in the face of the pandemic.

Building a Strong and Solid Social Support. Students coped with the FLT Mode of Instruction by drawing motivation from the people surrounding them, which include their family, friends, and teachers. This type of support fosters a great positive effect on the overall well-being of the students. This keeps them encouraged to strive for better even if the situation bears negative implications. Social support can benefit students' individual mental health, and those with a higher level of social support have more emotional stability than those with a lower level of social support (Mak et al., 2011).

Cultivating Self-Reliance. With the predicament imposed by the current learning setup, students resorted to self-directed learning by watching video tutorials on YouTube and other platforms. They trained themselves to be self-dependent learners. Through this, they were able to master competencies that they have a hard time grasping during virtual discussions. Also, one respondent shared that he ventured into exploring LMS manipulation so he would become familiar with its features.

Resourcefulness. The financial demands of the current teaching and learning setup challenged students. Hence, they searched for alternatives to sustain their monetary needs. Some students landed part-time jobs, while others resorted to financial assistance programs.

Practicing Self-Discipline. With the learning complexities in the FLT Mode of Instruction, students disciplined themselves as a way of coping with the current setup. They practiced time management to comply with all their academic requirements while juggling the distractions like social media and household chores. Self-discipline is a key feature in the students' success in battling the new normal education (Martarelli et al., 2021).

Establishing Academic Support Community. Students were able to create an academic support group which makes their learning easily managed. These academic supports include a study buddy, study group, or experts (in a certain field). The students rely on them for academic-related concerns. With the FLT Mode of Instruction, students' mastery of concepts was not fully grasped because of myriad factors - instruction delivery, environment, and personal. Thus, having this academic support provides the students an avenue to collaborate and brainstorm ideas leading to better mastery and retention of concepts. Kelly (2021) demonstrated the importance of academic support in battling the new normal education as it tops the priorities to be offered to students amid the pandemic.

Coping Strategies Employed by Teachers during Flexible Teaching

Shifting towards Learners' Welfare and Interest. Student-centeredness is a key factor in effective instruction-delivery, and it is proven in the face of FLT mode of instruction. Teachers coped with students' negative inclinations with the new learning setup by shifting their pedagogy towards learners' welfare and interest. One respondent shares her strategy of encouraging her students during their online discussion and how this has positively impacted her students. Other teachers reorient their students on their assessment guidelines to ensure that academic dishonesty is avoided. This result corroborates with the study of Agayon et al., 2022 where teachers "Communicare" with students to ensure that their academic and psychological needs are met.

Sourcing Out Free and Credible Teaching Materials. Teaching materials are on its primordial importance in the FLT mode of instruction. Due to physical restrictions, teachers are bridging the gap by providing tools and materials to increase instruction effectiveness. Hence, teachers sourced out free and credible teaching materials from the internet.

Embracing Teaching Alternatives. The demands of the FLT mode of instruction make time management difficult for teachers. From the preparation of flexible learning materials to ensuring that students obtain the expected competencies, teachers were trapped in managing their time effectively. To cope, teachers embraced teaching alternatives like filmed discussions or video-recorded lessons. According to the respondents, these teaching alternatives are convenient for both teachers and students. For teachers, filmed discussions could be used for multiple sections with the same course content. For students, video-recorded lessons could be downloaded and could be watched offline. Students also have the option of re-watching the lesson for mastery of concepts.

Upgrading Technological Capacities. Technology is teachers' primary medium in the FLT mode of instruction; thus, to cope with this learning setup, they upgraded their technological capacities by securing a strong and stable internet connection. In this way, teachers were able to deliver their instruction effectively.

CONCLUSIONS

Worldwide restrictions in mobility, during this time, has been slowly relaxing. Many schools have re-opened to continue with face-to-face learning, while others opted to still implement blended learning, or at least instituted some form of flexibility in dispending instruction. This is true even to the locale of the study (i.e. Pangasinan State University) in the Philippines. After all, governments now

adhere to the idea that mankind will have to co-exist with this COVID-19, and whether today or tomorrow, various strategies to cope with this inevitable situation have to be in place. In-depth studies are strongly encouraged, and to test which could sustain flexible teaching and learning in all educational levels is warranted.

This study has shown that the COVID-19 pandemic's effects on education has impacted both the students and teachers. In a similar study by Camara (2022), the researcher concluded that the Pangasinan State University was prepared in aspects under its control including provision of and orientation to online platforms, and plans to provide printed guides, but have an understandable lacking on challenges met including teaching and learning spaces, poor internet connection, and the capacity to purchase mobile load as means of students to attend classes online and recommended periodic assessment of the PSU's policies for Flexible Learning to provide continued and improved service delivery for both the faculty and students.

While there are issues and concerns common between these two 'education frontliners', it was shown that teachers have more significant issues to deal with as they are both in-charge with teaching and learning, while students are primarily responsible with their own learning alone. The students, though beset with problems with this set-up, have found strategies to cope with it eventually, similar to the study of Ballesteros, et al (2022) when they showed that the COVID-19 pandemic did not lower down the self-efficacy (i.e. belief in one's self) of Filipino undergraduates. Further, still Filipino students have high self-efficacy (Bermundo, et al., 2021).

Further, this study has revealed that Filipino teachers and students are resilient in dealing with any form of disturbance including the COVID-19. They were able to resort to coping strategies to 'survive' the times and to continue with teaching and learning. Some of these strategies may need to be tested for effectiveness, but at least to these teachers and learners, they are armed with strategies to sustain educational services, similar with the study of Bantique & Camara (2022) when they found that teachers recognized online teaching as both convenient and challenging, saying that most of the enormous changes in education are unanticipated.

Implications of these findings to Special Education is very important. It has to be understood that the participants (i.e. students) in this study are those in mainstream classrooms, and their issues and concerns are obviously different with those needing special care, especially the young learners and even adult learners. The level of coping strategies that may be required to have been manifested will be more challenging in the former compared with the latter. If these coping strategies by mainstream students could be used for a sustained teaching and learning when people learn to co-exist with COVID-19, another dimention of special attention for non-mainstream education frontliners has to be considered. Policy recommendations will be warranted.

LIMITATIONS

The study has considered a sample group of participants (n=14) to the focus group discussion and while extreme care was made to include participants to increase representativeness, other participants not within the FGD may have issues and concerns not reduced in the themes that evolved. The researchers were the main instruments in the development and processing of data transcripts and findings may not have enough exposure (i..e have not returned the transcripts to the members of FGD) for representation purposes following Collaizi's method.

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