A qualitative inquiry of the lived experiences of graduate students taking classes fully online during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has forced educators and learners all over the world to adapt to the "new normal" which involves classes that are held fully online. Unsurprisingly, numerous studies have already been carried out investigating this inevitable set-up and its implications. However, majority of the studies report quantitative results and fewer studies have been conducted with graduate students as participants. In this descriptive phenomenological study, the researcher interviewed seventeen (17) graduate students enrolled in different programs in private and public universities in Manila, Philippines. The purpose of this study was to fully describe their lived experience of studying fully online for the first time in their life. The data were analyzed using an open coding method from which emerged three (3) major themes: (1) Technology-related experiences, (2) studying-from-home experiences, and (3) experiences related to quality of teaching and learning. Sub-themes describing the experiences of these learners in a more specific manner are also reported. The descriptions reveal various practical, physiological, psychological and emotional challenges that they encountered as well as rewarding experiences that they obtained in fully online graduate classes. Implications on curriculum design are discussed and suggestions for future research given.

Key Words: pandemic; remote learning; distance learning; online learning; COVID-19

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 has brought about huge changes in the way things are accomplished in practically the whole world. All of humanity is impacted regardless of age, gender, race, educational background and attainment, or socioeconomic status. One domain that is experiencing enormous changes and making massive adjustments is education.

Almost without warning, lockdowns were imposed and teachers and students learned that they would not be coming back to campus and that a return to face-to-face learning would not be possible in the foreseeable future. Relationships with friends, sports teammates, significant others, professors, and others that are part of the glue holding students' campus experience together were stopped in their tracks, at least in the physical immediacy of the normal on campus experience at an actual physical structure. Extracurriculars were gone and even graduation ceremonies, one of the most symbolic and important events in the education experience, were delayed until

an unknown date, or held virtually (Dodge, Dussling, & Copp, 2020).

Distance education is certainly not new, but emergency remote teaching and learning is. From March 2020, educators and learners around the globe together with their colleagues and families have been forced to adapt to the "new normal" of teaching and learning. Technology appears to be one concern, specifically access to it and facility of it; however, the more pressing issue is the actual teaching and learning quality and experience.

Drexel University professor Scott Warnock says that "teaching online, like teaching onsite, is about recognizing your teaching talent zones or areas and finding ways to translate those talents to the teaching environment in which you are working" (Mendez-Newman, 2020, p. 55). Mendez-Newman (2020) defines talent zones as specific teaching that a teacher did exceptionally well in face-to-face classrooms that they would like to preserve in online teaching.

For some teachers and students, the shift from face-to-face teaching to remote instruction was fairly smooth, especially in private higher education institutions that already had an online learning management system (LMS) in place even before the pandemic broke out. Other schools may not be as fortunate because even with the availability of technological resources, many educators lacked the training and the right outlook towards online teaching. While some believe that the unplanned and rapid move to online learning – with no training, insufficient bandwidth, and little preparation – will result in a teaching and learning, others believe that a new hybrid model of education will emerge, with significant benefits (Li & Lalani, 2020). Certainly, teachers do their best to deliver in this mode, but ultimately, it is those at the "receiving end" so to speak – that is, the students, who create perceptions as to whether learning is indeed taking place and how they feel about the process.

Clearly, it is valuable to look into the experiences of students as they learn fully online possibly for the first time in their life. The perspectives of graduate students are especially important because aside from their academic requirements and responsibilities, they usually also juggle a family and a job at the same time. Numerous recent studies have focused on students' perspectives about online learning and the effects of their learning attitudes on their online learning readiness (Herguner, Son, Herguner Son & Donmez, 2020; Herguner, Yaman, Caglak Sari, Yaman, M. &Donmez, 2021; Rad, Otaki, Bagain, Zary, Al-Halabi,2021; Van

Wart, Ni & Medina, 2020) such as Mohan, Upadhyaya, and Pillai (2020) who reported the intention and barriers to use Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) among post graduate students in India. Dodd, Dadaczynsk, Okan, McCaffery and Pickles (2021) described the psychological well-being and academic experience of university students in Australia during COVID-19 and Katz and Larsen Walker (2020) were concerned about the cultivating critical thinking skills among graduate students in an online learning environment. However, majority of these investigations presented quantitative results and it is of equal importance to identify and recognize the lived experiences of these graduate students as they navigate this new mode of learning. A representation and understanding of these experiences, choices, and options and how these affected their learning is a testimonial to survival.

Thus, this exploratory qualitative study sought to describe the actual experiences of graduate students in the Philippines as they unwilfully learn in a fully online set-up.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This investigation is anchored on the connectivism theory of learning. The seminal theories of learning were developed in a time when learning was not impacted through technology. Over the last twenty or so years, technology has reorganized how we live, how we communicate, and how we learn. Learning needs and theories that describe learning principles and processes should be reflective of underlying social environments such as the COVID19 pandemic which has necessitated emergency remote teaching and learning. According to proponent George Siemens, "Connectivism is a learning theory for the Digital Age" (2004) and that learning is a process that occurs based upon a variety of continuously shifting elements. The "starting point of learning is the individual who feeds information into the network, which feeds information back to individuals who in turn feed information back into the network as part of a cycle" (Siemens, 2004). Connectivism is one of the most prominent of the network learning theories that have been developed for e-learning environments but is still largely based on constructivism. Constructivist-related theories on learning can be properly used in the fields of educational technology and distance education (Mattar, 2018).

3. METHODOLOGY
2.1 Research design

This study is a qualitative exploratory study investigating the lived experience of graduate students who learning fully online for the first time. Due to the lack of information on this topic, descriptive phenomenology was used to study and describe the students' experiences as fully and faithfully as possible. Descriptive phenomenology seeks to study participants' own views and meaning of their experience by describing the phenomenon under investigation with the words of the participants. It promotes a better understanding of the nature or meaning of life experiences, and strives to portray the essence of that "lived experience" (Creswell, 2007). Purposive sampling was used to recruit the participants and data were subjected to conceptual content analysis which determined the existence and frequency of concepts in the interview transcripts. The level of analysis utilized during open-coding was the theme.

2.2 Participants

The study had a total of seventeen (17) participants of which ten (10) were male. They are all graduate students with eleven (11) enrolled in a master's program (MA. And M.S.), five (5) in a doctoral program (Ph.D and D.B.A.) and one (1) in medical school. The number of terms they have been enrolled in their program ranges from two (2) to nine (9) terms or semesters and all of them have taken at least two (2) full terms of classes fully online. Fifteen of the participants are Filipino, one (1) is Myanmar and one (1) is Chinese.

2.3 Setting

All the interviews were done virtually via Zoom, an online platform for video and audio conferencing, classes, chat, and webinars.

2.4. Instrument

An interview protocol with only two open-ended questions was used. The participants were asked as to what they see and feel are the advantages and disadvantages of online classes in graduate school. Clarificatory and probing questions were asked as necessary. Each interview lasted approximately 20 to 30 minutes.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Three major themes emerged from the data which reflect the sentiments of the participants regarding having to attend graduate classes fully online: (1) Technology-related experiences, (2) studying-from-home experiences, and (3) experiences related to quality of teaching and learning.

Technology-related experiences. *Becoming more tech-savvy.* Most of the participants express satisfaction and fulfillment at their newly-acquired or improved skills in technology. Having classes fully online means having to be technology literate which the participants view as an advantage. As one participant put it: "I never even knew what Zoom was – now Ican operate it like a pro!" while another stated "I can now keep up with my own young students' tech-prowess!" *Accessibility and availability of study material.* In consideration of the online learning setup, professors usually give reading or study material in advance and the participants appreciate that and the convenience that these are accessible even when "classes" end. Majority of the participants said that "I can review my notes and learning materials after the classes. Our institution also provides video conferencing tools and premium accounts in various learning platforms that help us easily create assignments." A participant who has children is very happy about the study-from-home arrangement. "I am now less guilty in terms of allotting time for my kids because now I can hug and kiss whenever I want. That means a lot compared to before when I had to leave so early and come home late after long hours of travel. *Online classes are less intimidating.* Very possibly due to the distance and the "impersonality", some of the participants, particularly the international students expressed their preference for online classes as they feel "less intimidated" and shy to speak up in class. The participant from China said "In an online class, I feel more confident to express my thoughts or opinion whereas in face to face classes I feel nervous." *Feedback and evidence of progress are more accessible.* One participant is particularly pleased that he can see his progress in his course anytime he wants. "It's very organized, very structured. With just one click on the learning management system, I can see my professor's feedback and all the scores I have obtained so far. It's like having your very own copy of the professor's record book. *Poor internet connection and other tech-related problems.* Almost all of the participants mentioned this challenge as the biggest disadvantage of fully online classes. The issues range from poor internet connectivity to lack of knowledge in using some learning management systems or platforms. In the Philippines, especially, internet

connectivity is very intermittent or slow. This will continue to be a challenge if classes will continue to be conducted fully online in the next several years.

Studying from home-related experiences. _No need to travel/commute to campus._ The participants expressed relief at not having to spend so much time commuting, driving and being stuck in traffic. One participant said: "No more spending five hours on the road each time I have classes." "I save so much on gas and toll fees." Another expressed his sentiments in the following words: "I save a lot of time and energy and am able to focus on the discussion; I am not that tired even if I work in the morning and have classes in grad school in the afternoon. Aside from transportation expenses, one participant said that she is also able to save on other things: "I do not have to spend on my meals, transportation, photocopies, and the like. _Flexible and comfortable working hours and space._ One advantage that the participants see in fully online classes is that they are able to work comfortable from their own home or wherever they are. A participant which is in medical school said "I don't have to wake up early or rush because I will just be attending classes from my bedroom." Another expressed pleasure at a small but important convenience: "Sometimes I take power naps in between classes which help a lot. I wasn't able to do that when classes were in campus." _Lack of ideal space to study from home._ One participant described her home as being "less than ideal" as a place to do serious studying. According to her: "My family lives in a middle-class neighborhood where the only thing that separates us from the neighbors are firewalls and some low concrete partitions. This means that I can hear almost everything going on at the neighbor's house (crying babies, dogs barking, talking people, etc,). I find it annoying and distracting but there is little I can do about it. I also live with extended family. My sister, who lives with us have 2 kids, a preschooler and a baby. Both are really noisy during the day. The elder one always insists on staying with me in my room. Sweet, but takes the time supposed to be spent studying or doing asynchronous activities. I know I should refuse, but it's a bit hard sometimes. The baby on the other hand, cries all the time. It makes it so hard to study. Other family members also make a lot of noise. My room also tends to get too hot at midday

and the heat is so uncomfortable." _Too many distractions due to lack of structured/physical classroom set up._ Clearly, no matter how ideal one's study from homework space is, a house will never lack for distractions. As one participant put it: "There is a decreasing feeling of urgency and drive to accomplish a task because you're just at home." Another has a similar experience and said "There's this thought of "this lesson is being recorded, I can just access this later on" which eventually leads to procrastination."

Quality of teaching & learning-related experiences. _Lack of face-to-face interaction and socialization with professors and classmates._ Despite the conveniences of online learning, many of the respondents still consider face to-face interaction a necessity. One expressed this need saying: "I dislike the fact that I don't get to see my classmates in person and to see their reactions, laughs, or hear their side comments," while another said; "Relationships, aside from the learning of content, are also virtual. You don't get to know your classmates nor your professors that well. They're just faces on a screen." Further, one participant observed: "I miss the classroom interaction that made me enjoy learning in the first place." _Difficulty of doing collaborative work._ Despite the existence of video conferencing platforms such as Google Meet and Zoom, it is apparent that nothing beats old-fashioned face-to-face brainstorming. As one participant put it: "I found it more difficult to interact with my classmates for group work because everything is done thru e-mail, and sometimes, instant messaging apps (i.e. Viber or Messenger). Because of this, brainstorming with my classmates has been ineffective and unfruitful." And sometimes it is made even more difficult by technical challenges or not having the necessary hardware. The participant in medical school laments: "Trying to accomplish group work online is frustrating. One of the hallmarks of medical education are the small group discussions wherein we discuss cases and make an output showcasing the extensiveness of a single disease. Connectivity and hardware issues make me dread this activity. I can barely keep up with the making of the diagrams because my laptop is old and slow. _Tendency of some professors to give too much asynchronous tasks to "compensate."_ Too much of anything cannot be good and this is evident in full online learning. As

one participant describes it: "Because of less classroom discussions, some professors resort to requiring more paper work as a substitute for it and set unrealistic deadlines" and at least a third of the participants share the same experience. *Passive student participation.* A participant observed that "some students become complacent in actively participating in class which leads to a one-way learning experience. The teacher ends up talking the entire session since students do not respond/participate well." *Difficulty of collecting data for research.* One participant shared that it is difficult to collect data for papers which are a requirement for most of the courses in graduate school. "Interviews can be done online but we cannot go to sites to observe. It's also hard to conduct focus group discussions online" he describes.

5. CONCLUSIONS

One thing to keep in mind is that research findings from a qualitative, phenomenologically-oriented study such as this, are not usually generalizable or applicable to other contexts. McLeod (2011) asserts that phenomenology strives to generate a description of the phenomenon that leads to an understanding of the "essential structure" of the lived experience.

In this study, seventeen graduate students shared their experiences of taking graduate courses fully online for the first time. They reported on both the advantages and disadvantages of this learning arrangement that was not of their own choosing. Describing their experiences, they were able to come to terms with their own sentiments, opinions, and emotions about online learning during a pandemic. This expanded awareness can begin to develop a greater appreciation for learning, resourcefulness and creativity, and resilience in the midst of crises. More importantly, the advantages of online learning experienced by the students reveals the COVID-19 pandemic as a gamechanger in teaching and learning. around the globe. As Volery and Lord observed in the year 2000, successful institutions take advantage of anything that can serve as a catalyst for institutional transformation. They further mention the need for higher education institutions to expand access, alleviate capacity constraints, and capitalize on emerging market opportunities. Macro benefits aside, however, institutions might also want to take advantage of

"micro-benefits" of online education such as viewing it as an opportunity to for teachers and students to know each other and each other's needs on a more personal level. Classroom learning communities, whether face-to-face or virtual, are safe spaces and sources of support, belonging, and joy. Through this unprecedented experience of emergency remote teaching and learning due to COVID-19, it is clearer than ever how important it is to build relationships with students and help them forge connections with each other. As Dodge et al. (2020) observe, the context of learning and teaching at home where personal space is on display imposes a level of vulnerability that can be uncomfortable, but it also "humanizes" both teachers and students in a way that was not possible on campus. Insights into personal lives and space may lead to more willingness to share and unload emotionally which is important during this unprecedented time. This openness may then provide both teachers and learners with the impetus to work even harder to get to know one another at a deeper level. It also helps teachers think more about what may be going on behind the scenes when students are struggling with classes and vice-versa.

Certainly, a pandemic is a global health occurrence that is highly unpredictable and that has long-term consequences; however, it does open opportunities for innovation and growth. Further study would also do well to focus on the teachers' and other stakeholders' perspectives, and the specific effects of online teaching and learning on academic performance and implications and suggestions for online curricula can be developed from the data.

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