A Study on College Students' Experiences in Flexible Learning in Apayao State College, Conner Campus

Agustina G. Pattung ᵃ*

ᵃ Apayao State College, Malama, Conner, Apayao, Philippines.

Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions implemented flexible learning beyond on-campus and online learning during the pandemic. This study determined students' experiences with flexible learning, particularly modular and online modalities, and their problems with learning remotely. The study used descriptive research. The study's respondents were College freshmen of Apayao State College Conner Campus. The researcher thematically analyzed the student's responses to flexible learning experiences. The study made use of descriptive statistics in analyzing problems encountered. The experiences included challenges in the modular approach, availability of learning resources, usage of ICT, social interaction, and assessment modifications. The students encountered problems in flexible learning, such as ICT-related, modular, financial, and social-related problems. The College should formulate plans and implement adequate strategies to address the challenges and issues in flexible learning modalities within the College.

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Corresponding author: Email: tinbio05@yahoo.com;

1. INTRODUCTION

Learning institutions switched their instructional approaches from face-to-face to remote education in response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) to contain the spread and lessen the impact of this disease during the height of the pandemic. Undergraduate programs necessitate a practical component; however, because of the COVID-19 problem, educators face the challenge of maintaining student learning under such conditions [1].

Higher education students are calling for more flexible learning beyond the on-campus or online dichotomy due to the challenges of holistic development. Applying blended synchronous teaching and learning for flexible learning in higher education or implementing combined learning differs depending on the environment. Still, it is a valuable technique to expand learning options and promote students' flexible learning. When students pursue flexible learning, there are practical challenges established in the setting of a regular classroom [2].

In the Philippines, both private and public higher education institutions (HEIs) started to implement the Commission on Higher Education's (CHED) guidelines through flexible learning modalities beginning with the Academic Year 2020–2021 [3]. Since not all students have access to the necessary resources for online learning, CHED Memorandum Order No. 04, series 2020 on "Guidelines on the Implementation of Flexible Learning" embodied the implementation of flexible learning in Philippines HEIs. In terms of place, pace, process, and products of learning, it is the design and implementation of programs, courses, and learning interventions that consider learners' particular needs. It combines digital and non-digital technologies and includes in-person learning and learning outside of the classroom, as well as a combination of both, by CMO No. 04, series of 2020.

Apayao State College (ASC) implemented flexible learning based on the ASC Learning Continuity Plan for School Year 2020-2021 with BOT Resolution No. 84-06, series of 2020. The approved plan detailed the systems and procedures to transition to flexible learning, including online and offline modalities during the new average education.

With the implementation of flexible learning, it is essential to determine the experiences of students on flexible learning, particularly modular and online modalities, and their problems with learning remotely to contribute to a better understanding of students' situation and online learning environment and improve the design of flexible learning implementation in the future.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The study aimed to determine the flexible learning experiences of first-year College students in Apayao State College –Conner Campus, Malama, Conner, Apayao.

Specifically, it sought answers to the following questions:

1. What are the respondents' experiences in flexible learning using modular and online modalities?
2. What are the common problems encountered by the respondents in terms of:
2.1. ICT-related problems
2.2. Modular-related problems
2.3. Social-related problems
2.4. Academic-related problems

2. METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted at Apayao State College- Conner Campus in Barangay Malama, Conner, Apayao. The respondents included 101 first-year students enrolled in the College of Teacher Education (CTE) of the Conner Campus. The student respondents came from two (2) classes. The study made use of descriptive methods of research. The questionnaire was used as the main instrument. The researcher analyzed the textual response to determine experiences with flexible learning during the pandemic and employed frequency and ranking on problems encountered in implementing flexible learning.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Experiences of Students in Flexible Learning during the New Normal

The flexible learning implementation of the College employed offline and online modalities. As part of the offline modality implemented, students were given instructional materials in modules or work for all subjects. The College distributed worktext every month and retrieval outputs of the same. The students received modules at designated Local Government Units

(LGUs) pick-up points. Moreover, online learning synchronously and asynchronously was implemented for the online modality of flexible learning. On top of the modular approach, the conduct of online lectures via Google Meet or Zoom, asynchronously using Google Classroom, emailing, and messaging / Google chat for communication and uploading of materials. The students claimed appreciation of the flexible learning to address the threat and spread of the virus. Flexible learning environments are vital for creating a sustainable lifelong learning process in school contexts [4].

Moreover, this is supported by the study of Abisado, Unico, Umoso, Manuel, and Barroso [5], as most students are ready for flexible learning delivery in terms of self-directedness towards learning. They are adopting flexible learning modalities to ensure the safety of Filipino learners against being infected with the virus. Learning and instructional materials in digital print shall also be provided for the teaching community. Good self-discipline and responsibility for the learning process are needed for flexible learning.

The researcher analyzed students' responses on their experiences of flexible learning using offline and online modalities in five themes.

Theme 1. The modular approach is challenging.

The respondents claimed that during this pandemic, the were challenged in doing academic tasks and exercises contained in their modules with little guidance or the absence of a teacher due to no face-to-face classes. The students needed further elaboration on complex contents and topics in the modules. Having to study and work on modules at home, they are worried about whether their answers in the different exercises were sufficient. The findings imply that the teacher's presence to explain the students in the teaching-learning scenario still needs the lesson. Some students claimed they received their modules on time, while others claimed they received them late. Some students' outputs from the activities in the modules were not retrieved on time, considering that the students are not allowed to submit their outputs personally to their teachers, and some late submissions of not following the retrieval schedules.

Theme 2. Learning Resources

Some students needed help answering module activities due to the absence of learning resources at home during the pandemic. They also required the use of the facilities of the college library, like books and other references, including ICT facilities of the College. Other students claimed that during the pandemic, the students have the flexibility to obtain information on the internet and the flexibility of time to read materials both the readings in the modules, downloaded resources, or directly from online resources. The findings are supported by Rahman, Novitasari, Handrianto, and Rasool [6], that synchronous and asynchronous learning experiences are essential when using various internet-connected gadgets. As a result, students can learn on their schedule, and this has the potential to enhance students' online learning performance [7].

Theme 3. Use of Information Communication Technology (ICT)

Regarding online modality, the students received materials uploaded to the Google Classroom and communication via Group Chat or messaging. Communication between teacher and students and among students was appreciated by the respondents using Messenger. The findings are supported by Salazar [8] that one of the current trends in ICT is the use of Facebook Messenger. Facebook Messenger is economically friendly and does not require company subscriptions and stringent processes to be employed. He mentioned that as of 2020, there were 2.77 billion users of Facebook Messenger worldwide, which is expected to reach 3 million by 2022. This Facebook contact-based instant messaging service enables users to send and receive text messages, images, videos, voice conversations, money, files, and even their location. Live video calls and group conversations are two of its key features. Also, most teachers discovered Messenger to be a simple way to communicate with and instruct college students. They find it very easy to give instructions about the tasks.

Other experiences of the students identified during this pandemic are the demand for internet access and better ICT gadgets. Participation in online lectures was challenging due to an unstable internet connection. As much as they want to socialize with classmates and friends, due to health protocols, they see them virtually. Since they are experiencing a lack of learning resources at home the internet was mainly the source of information, thus the absence of peer-to-share learning. Many claimed that they needed to be more dependent on digital

resources. Thus, Information Communication Technology (ICT) was seen as the most vital source of information, considering that the libraries and classrooms were closed for them to obtain readings, assignments, and other learning needs. This development of technology and the internet, where over 6 out of every 10 of the roughly 8 billion people on the planet are linked, makes e-learning essential to the educational system, given how important technology is to learning in the twenty-first century [9]. The results indicate that the majority of students' online learning experiences are produced in such a way that they were able to cope with the technical and mental requirements, were prepared to use e-learning resources and tools, and work with their academic coursework without or fewer challenges encountered [3]. Even without electricity or roads, students in remote parts of the nation lack access to computers and the internet. Furthermore, due to the state of the Internet infrastructure, even metropolitan students may only have intermittent access to the Internet [10].

Table 1. Problems Encountered by the Freshmen Related to Flexible Learning *

Problems	f	Rank
1. ICT related - problems		
a. Unstable internet connection at home / present residences	101	1
b. High cost of ICT gadgets and equipment	65	2
c. Expensive internet data	55	3
d. Unavailable resources	30	4
e. Absence of ICT gadgets	10	5
f. Lack of digital literacy skills	5	6
2. Modular related - problems		
a. Schedule of distribution of worktext	23	1
b. Location of residence	21	2
c. Difficult content the modules	20	3
d. Students' activities are lost	19	4
e. Additional discussion of lesson	9	5
f. Many activities in the modules	8	6
g. Difficulty understanding some of the topics	5	7
3.Social related -factors		
a. No social interactions with peers	29	1
b. Multiple tasks at home	14	2
c. Lack of instant communication	5	3
4. Academic related- factors		
a. Incomplete grades	5	1
b. Loss of motivation	3	2

*Multiple responses

Theme 4. Social Interaction

The concern of distance education is social integration, peer culture, and the potential for value transmission in a "virtual" classroom [10]. The students claimed that they missed the presence of their peers and classmates to help

them in their lesson, as well as group dynamics and other collaborative activities. Online classes tend to lessen contact with classmates and teachers compared to traditional face-to-face classes. The findings run parallel with that of Varachotisate, Siritaweechai, Kositanurit, Thanprasertsuk, and Chayanupatkul [11], that students reported fewer interactions with peers or teachers, despite the use of a variety of online interactive tools and instructional techniques to sustain social interactions in learning experiences during online classrooms. According to Rahman, Novitasari, Handrianto, and Rasool [6], asynchronous environment's instructional resources may provide little feedback. However, Yu [7] identified that teachers can encourage class participation by reminding students via social media, email, phone, text, or other interactive platforms.

Theme 5. Modification in Assessment

Along with assessments, students worked with performance-based assessments, video-based assessments, and project-based assessments. The students have needed help with examinations, quizzes, and online submissions. They appreciated the modifications in the way assessment in their courses. Varachotisate, Siritaweechai, Kositanurit, Thanprasertsuk, Chayanupatkul, Thongsricome, and Kaikaew [11] mentioned that online formative evaluation was employed in the COVID-19 year to assist teachers in gauging student participation and progress toward learning objectives. However, students' academic achievement may be partially reflected in formative assessments. Flexibility is the most intriguing feature of online learning [6]. Yu [7] mentioned that difficult to accurately and appropriately evaluate successes in an online learning environment. Online evaluation paradigms for learning outcomes diverge significantly from conventional approaches. Several formative evaluation paradigms have been developed since the sudden switch to online learning, including online quizzes or exams, online engagement (responses, feedback, video-watching sessions, or online discussion), peer interactions, and peer assessment. It is challenging to implement due to varying degrees of digital literacy, cheating, technological issues, bad internet connection, and underdeveloped digital infrastructures; the summative assessment paradigm, such as online final exams, is helpful for online assessment. In contrast to traditional exams, online exams can

be used on learning platforms where student scores can be quickly gathered and examined. To design the educational process, teachers may quickly.

3.2 Problems Encountered on Flexible Learning Implementation

The student-respondents have identified related problems during the implementation of flexible learning. The top problems encountered by the respondents were ICT-related problems. Most residences still need network signals due to the topographic locations of students in far-flung areas. Poor or not-so-stable internet connectivity was a problem also identified by some students. The cost of ICT gadgets for learning is expensive. Students need financial assistance to buy loads for their online classes. Some also have identified that they need laptops for their classes. Anderton, Vitali, Blackmore, and Bakeberg [1] pointed out that the impact of COVID-19 focuses on the developed world, where technology and a means of improving student engagement over the internet have been possible. Unfortunately, internet and technological resources are more scarce in less developed nations, even in low socioeconomic settings in some first-world countries.

Moreover, Dizon Errabo [12] highlighted the consequences and complexity of limited internet connectivity, loss of human interaction, and low skill in digital platforms as the primary problems and disadvantages of online learning [13-15]. These findings are consistent with the study of Baticulon et al. (2021), who found that the majority of students use mobile devices or smartphones in their online learning and also confirm the findings of Saavedra (2020), that access to remote learning devices, such as computers/desktop/laptop has been a recurring challenge for students as schools shift to online learning and supported by Rotas and Cahapay (2020) that this problem may stem from financial issues as another difficulty disclosed by students on data connection and internet connection [16,17]. Students needed a constant internet connection to fully engage in online learning [12]. Furthermore, Kundu and Bej (2021) mentioned that this shift was more challenging for rural and urban students. These perceptional differences were statistically significant, and most rural students mentioned not having good network connectivity in their respective villages.

4. CONCLUSION

The first-year College students had varied experiences in flexible learning, particularly challenges in using the printed modular approach, availability of learning resources at home, readiness and cost of ICT, limited social interaction, and adjustments on the types of assessments. In addition, the most common problems encountered were ICT–related problems, modular-related problems, social-problems and problems with academic performance during the COVID-19 pandemic.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Administration and teachers should formulate plans and strategies to address the challenges and problems in flexible learning modalities within the College.
2. The school authorities should work with the teachers in addressing the problems faced by students as they migrate to the new average education.
3. Necessary resources should be provided among teachers and students for successful flexible learning.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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