Lived Experience of Overcoming the Feeling of Isolation in Distance Learning in the Philippines: A Phenomenological Inquiry

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Abstract

In this research, the author presents the lived experience of a graduate student and how she has overcome the feeling of isolation and challenges in distance learning. The participant of this qualitative phenomenological study is student from Visayas State University Open University (VSU-OU). This qualitative phenomenological study (Chambers, 2013) seeks to measure the in-depth experience of a distance learner from the southern Philippines and systematically analyze the culture of distance learning in order to understand the phenomenon of isolation and be able to share in future studies. With in-depth personal interview, this study also allows readers to witness his personal stories which may validate others' experiences who may not have an avenue to research about - hence phenomenological. It used the thematic qualitative approach in organizing the data presented in the study which involves analyzing themes and patterns she experienced in the phenomenon. It also mentions the respondent's steps of overcoming isolation in distance education and avoiding quitting the study. And to do so, a network of connection among learners and university shall be present in order for a distance learner to succeed in the mode.

Keywords: distance learning, COVID 19, distance education, asynchronous, isolation

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Introduction

Before the pandemic, distance education flourished at a few universities in the Philippines. Distance learners are enthusiastic about this mode because of its flexibility, convenience, and for some, affordability. The rapid change in the education system and instructional delivery in the Philippines due to COVID -19 has led educational institutions to shift from the traditional form of on-site instruction to a completely virtual form of distance education (Núñez& Cuisia-Villanueva, 2020). The Ministry of Education is doing everything possible to make the transition smooth, focusing only on how schools will deliver the curriculum in various forms other than regular pre-pandemic schooling. Over the past year, various academic organizations and schools have held webinars on online teaching techniques, online or distance assessment methods, technology-dependent projects, and more to prepare teachers for the new normal. Learners are left behind with no training on how to behave as distance or online learners (Rush, 2015).

This study is about the experience of a graduate school distance learner in the Philippines and how she was able to overcome the feeling of isolation and its challenges in this type of learning. With this study, it validates the experiences of other learners who are in the same situation especially those who are living in the rural or remote areas, most specially adult learners who bombarded with responsibilities at home, work, and school this article focuses on a legitimate distance learner experience amidst of all the challenges in the process.

Review of Literature

Distance education plays an important role in meeting the needs of people who have thirst and hunger for education but cannot complete their studies through the formal or regular education system (Attri, 2012). Moreover, distance learning is an ever-evolving learning method with special characteristics that distance learners learn separately from both the tutor and the educational institution (Vakoufari, Christina, &Mavroidis, 2014). The Internet has had a resounding impact on education by both supplementing classroom activities and providing educators with new ways to teach (Dickey, 2004). Since the age of the internet and the fast pace development of humanity, the demand for skills and higher education has risen in a far-reaching phase (Vonberg, 2015). As people get more occupied as the internet gets faster and the onset of pandemic, learners have become or forced to be more flexible in their learning styles (Núñez& Cuisia-Villanueva, 2020). And with that, schools and universities must also adapt to this change in order to meet

the needs of these emerging type of learners. Most higher education institutions in the countries have started offering distance education to adapt to the hectic schedules of learners. Online instructional design has evolved from a specialized skill to a widespread and even a generalized skill in the right schools (Lineberger, 2016). Distance education, therefore, functions in a more flexible and friendly environment, resulting in a better balance between coursework and students' lives, reducing stress and absenteeism (Badu-Nyarko, 2010).

Of course, distance or online study is not without its problems and challenges, and one of them is isolation of the student. According to Cambridge Dictionary (2021), isolation is: "the state of being alone, especially when it makes one feel miserable"; or "the fact that something is separate and not connected with other things"; or "the state of being separated from other people, cities, countries, etc". This definition is in line with the study of Mbukusa, Kibuule, & Lates (2017) from the University of Namibia. They mentioned that isolation can be characterized by time (simultaneous studies), space (geographical dispersion), social (perception of others), intellectual/experiential (academic skills and life experiences), occupational (subject related expertise), ICT knowledge, sensory (ability to see/feel/hear peers), cultural and subject (whether someone else is studying the same subject). In the study written by Fulmer (2020), three types of isolation are distinguished: interpersonal, intrapersonal, and existential. Interpersonal isolation is comparable to loneliness. The oft-repeated phrase "it's not the quantity of your relationships that matters, it's the quality" is relevant here. Certain personality styles may crave interactions with other people more than other styles. Group identity also matters, including whether you belong to a group traditionally shunned or oppressed by society.

Furthermore, Fulmer mentioned that intrapersonal isolation means denying a part of the self. It is as if a part of someone has died or as if he/she has left the whole. And finally, existential isolation. This is a form of isolation that refers to the fundamental gap that exists between people, no matter how close the bond. For example, someone's experience of an event like the coronavirus scare is unique to him/her, and his/her feelings about it, his/her assessments of it, and the exact encounters he/she has because of it live only within him/her.

Distance learning university students are at the highest risk of dropping out. This can be attributed in large part to the isolation these students experience (Chan & Lee, 2007). They (Chan & Lee, 2007) added that students of all types want to have a sense of belonging to a

larger university community rather than just being an enrolled student, or worse, part of the statistics for the course.

Dabaj and Yetkin (2011) mentions that the challenges of distance learning become even greater when learners are geographically isolated. They added added that this further complicates the outcomes of the learning process for adult learners. Burns (2016) mentioned that forty percent (40%) of learners worldwide have dropped out of distance learning. One of the reasons Burns cites is the paradigm that learners must learn alone - hence "solo learner." Without a sense of connection, she added, learner engagement decreases and they leave or even drop out of the program. In a study conducted at India's largest open university, Indira Ghandi National Open University (IGNOU), one of the nine main reasons for distance learners dropping out of the program was that they were unable to visit study centers or learning centers to attend various counseling and coaching sessions which led to their action (Fozdar, Kumar, & Kannan, 2006). According to GilletSwan (2017), some of the problems experienced may be personal in nature such as: Anxiety related to the use of technology, stepping out of one's comfort zone, (perceived) unfairness in assessment, especially in "group" tasks, and (perceived) inability or difficulty in interacting with peers, especially in presentations.

In the same study conducted by Xavier and Meneses (2020), dropout rates have become the major concern of higher education institutions that provide this type of training. It was mentioned that the rate has increased to fifty percent (50%) for first-year students. And in open universities, dropout is the norm and graduation are an aberration, making dropout rate one of the biggest challenges.

Furthermore, Thompson (2017) likened isolation as just another *"elephant in the room"* of education technology. In his paper, he mentions that the range of distance learners' dropout is at 20 to 50 per cent. This is attributed to the point that some students in distance learning programs and courses report feelings of isolation, lack of self-direction, and management, and eventually decrease in motivation levels. A study was conducted by Rush (2015) with a total of one thousand two (1,002) students surveyed from the University of Tasmania, Australia identified as distance learning. Students were examined, "What is the meaning of isolation to you?" and in Likert-type explorations, respondents indicated that: "feeling left out"; "feeling disconnected or forgotten"; "feeling like I am the only one studying the subject"; and "feeling all alone". In the same study, more than half of the respondents said that the best aspect of distance learning was "flexibility". However, respondents also said that the worst thing was the isolation and lack of

contacts. A study that also agrees with the study conducted with the students of Zimbabwe Open University. In the research (Chinwanza, Mapuranga, Musingafi, Zebron, 2015), the authors stated that the belated and unproductive feedback (lack of contact) was an added load on the learners which was on top of the existing problems of isolation.

Meanwhile, a study conducted by Al-Harthi (2005) mentions that students view isolation differently. The author found out that those feelings including distance can suggest meaning depending on the cultural orientation of a student. In the paper which was done in a US university, Asia-Pacific trained students were more fretful of isolation from their teachers or professors. It was written that these learners view their professors as "figure of authority" and "the source of knowledge". Consequently, the European raised learners interpret isolation as missed chance or opportunity to have classroom interactions and exchange of ideas among classmates and teachers.

Upon reviewing the available literature about isolation in distance education, one qualitative question to systematically describe the experience of the participant. This paper focuses on the respondent's experiences, challenges, and benefits of being a distance learner, albeit overcoming isolation in distance education. Hence, the questions asked: "How were you able to conquer isolation in your journey in distance learning?"

Methodology

This study utilizes the qualitative type of research inquiry under the umbrella of the phenomenological approach. The said approach to qualitative research focuses on the shared or similarity of lived experience within a particular group. The main objective was to come up with a definition of the nature of a phenomenon of the researched subject. Generally, interviews are organized with a group of people who have first-hand knowledge and experience on the researched event, culture, or phenomenon (Chambers, 2013).

The interview attempts to answer two broad questions:

1. What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon - isolation?
2. What contexts or situation have typically influenced your experiences in the phenomenon?

Varied forms of data can be utilized such as documents, observations, art, or photographs. Then these are reviewed and organized like phrases or themes that will eventually form meaning in relation to the researched topic. Through this process the researcher may construct the universal meaning of the event, situation or experience and arrive at a more profound understanding of the phenomenon (Chambers, 2013).

According to the book written by Creswell (2007), qualitative research participants range from one (1) to a larger pool of respondents. Since the study utilized the qualitative approach. On their papers, Qutoshi (2015) and Saludadez (2018) mentioned that the researcher has lived through an experience and has consuming unanswered questions about it can use introspection as a data source, and following accepted practices of field research, hence "n" is equal to 1 (n=1).

The method used to collect pertinent data for the research is through in-depth interview. An audio call on Facebook Messenger was scheduled. The participant was asked questions in relation to the experience and isolation feelings as distance learner – hence the phenomenon. Then, thematic analysis was employed by the researcher for data interpretation.

Thematic analysis, as outlined by Neuendorf (2019), is a qualitative design of study drawing out themes through inductive approach derived from the interview and helps formulate a new explanation or interpretation of the problem. Repeated listening to the partcipant's responses on the interview were done in order to pick the significant categories and features that helped the researcher identify the themes of the study.

In the interview, the researcher found out one theme and a sub-theme of the problems of the participant: (theme) the feeling of isolation and (sub-theme) the challenges encountered that added to the feeling of isolation.

Participant of the Study

The participant of this qualitative inquiry is a distance student enrolled in one of the online/distance master's degrees at the Visayas State University – Open University (VSU-OU). Upon the request of the participant, the author withheld the identity of the interviewee. In this research, the participant was named Maria Santos.

She started her journey as distance education learner in mid of 2019. While VSU-OU headquarters is situated in the central part of the country, the participant resides in the southern zone of the archipelago – hence a distance learner.

Setting

The setting of the study is conducted upon a student of VSU-OU. A premier research national university in the Philippines which offers distance type of learning online. VSU-OU offers a non-thesis pure online master's degree. Master's in Agricultural Development majors in Agricultural Education, Agricultural Extension, Horticulture, Animal Science, Development Communication, and Language Teaching, etc. are a few of the degree courses the university offers. The program is offered in semester

basic (first, second, and summer) and learners can be admitted even at a distance. The delivery of courses for each program is asynchronous.

Discussion

Maria's setup as compared to other distance learners in the university is different because she is among the few students who opted for modular type of learning. Modular type of learning where modules are printed and sent through couriers. Other students in her the university opted for the faster way of module distribution, which is through email.
Maria's journey as DE learner started at work. She explains:

"I opted to enroll in VSU Open University because I have a colleague who's also a graduate in the same mode of learning. In addition, the flexibility that the university offers really suits my need. I have business, family, and work, this type of learning method could enable me to pursue higher studies at the safety of my home."

The flexibility that the distance education in VSU can offer opted Maria to enroll instead going into a regular classroom setup of learning nearby.

During the conversation, she added that it was a tough process from accomplishing all the paper works and travelling to places to secure requirements. Not having someone to connect from the university was one of the factors that made it more difficult for her. She mentioned:

"At first, I don't know anyone and where to start. It was quite challenging because living far away from university, contacting from time to time was a hurdle, and to add to that is the slow internet connection. It was difficult to reach out with other classmates because I felt isolated, given the fact that they all live in the same place near to the university."

In her respective entry date, Maria did not know how the process will work as she did not have connections at the start of the very first course. In most universities, external students in institutions have the highest risk for withdrawal from studies of any group in the first year of the study (Rostaminezhad, Mozayani, Norozi, &Iziy, 2013). She said:

"On the very first course, I felt that I never belonged to a learning community, because I was so alone. Living distant away from the university is desolating. It was desolating because as new distance learner it was difficult to do everything on my own just handling my printed modules and communicating only through emails. There was even time that I asked myself if I could survive this mode of learning."

There was also a time when she stopped for a semester and did not enroll. She mentioned that because of earthquake and typhoons in the southern part of the country:

"Due to past environmental devastation in our area and difficulty to reach out, I opted to file for a Leave of Absence (LOA). I never wanted to do it, but I couldn't bear the feeling of learning alone given the situation around me. I could not concentrate on my modules because I still feel the trauma happened to me inside the mall when the earthquake happened."

However, when the pandemic hit, Maria mentions that her setup did not change due to the fact the she started to become a distance learner prior COVID-19. She mentions:

"When the pandemic took the world by storm, it did not change my situation because I have been a distance learner even before it happened. In fact, it allowed me to adjust smoothly and helped members of my family in dealing with distance learning. Though challenges like unstable internet connection still there, the overall impact of pandemic in my learning mode did not change. It even encouraged me to finish my degree."

During the Facebook Messenger call, she also mentioned that one of the challenges that causes her stress is the modules and other infrastructural mishaps. She tells:

"When the pandemic hit, the implementation of university-wide distance / online mode of teaching and learning affected my current setup. I specifically mentioned during my enrollment that I will be modular (asynchronous) because I live in rural area and we did not have stable internet connection. My job also requires me to be full time and on-call. Now, the problem is, some professors require me to attend online (synchronous) classes and join my other classmates who were directed to distance learning. It made crumble, but I was able to negotiate that synchronous is never in my option in the very first place due to my situation."

Currently, the Maria decided to continue her academic journey as distance learner. She explains that regardless of how prepared or smart a student is, isolation and alienation could really affect the process of learning in any form. She also emphasized the importance of an academic or peer community (Croft, Dalton, & Grant, 2010) in distance learning, especially when someone lives miles away from the university. It is also not just a community of learning but also social personal interaction (Scott, 2017). She narrated:

> *"I was really about to quit and enroll to another university because I never had someone to talk to and to ask for help. I tried to enroll but the university seemed to have not replied to my email for quite some time. I was losing my hope. Good thing you (Jayrome), was there to help me out go through what I was feeling. Now, I will be graduating in few months. I am very excited!"*
>
> *"I know that you (Jayrome) also feel what I feel because we are in the same boat – distance learning."*

As of the moment, Maria is on her last semester of her master studies and targets to finish it by the half of 2022. She gladly shared:

> *"It has been a journey studying all by myself. It is not the academic or course work that was hard for me, it is the feeling of isolation going through this alone. Back in college, we all have friends to share, but as our responsibilities increase, our time to deal with our goals have become burdensome resulting to isolation. I could not wait to graduate!"*

Results

In the theme, the isolation. The fact that the learner studies alone and far from the vicinity of the university has made the learning itself a challenge. With little to no help or support from peers or even university, the participant have felt isolated in the learning process. The feeling of aloneness have increased as the participant gotten less feedback (Fozdar, Kumar, & Kannan, 2006) and because of this experience, the participant felt the she never belonged to a learning community (Chan & Lee, 2007).

The sub-theme are the challenges. While she studies alone, hurdles have arisen in the process which added to the difficulty of the learning setup. The lack of stable internet connection, devastating environmental events, Covid-19, and work schedule have added up resulting to almost failing in the modality.

Contrarily, the Covid-19 situation, the participant did not need to adjust more to the learning setup because she has already started prior pandemic. The situation allowed her to easily transition with learning setup and able to help family members in doing so.

Conclusions

Isolation really affects someone's academic performance, much more if the student lives miles away from the enrolled university. In the conversation, the main challenge was the location and the mediocre infrastructure where the participant is situated. Being a distance learner, the number one tool must be a good and reliable interpersonal connection, both emotional (community of learners) and physical (internet). Isolation

therefore can be overcome by ensuring that there is more and frequent communication to students (Mbukusa, Kibuule, & Lates, 2017).

One of the most important steps that distance learner could do to get over from isolation is to reach out from other distance learners because they, too, surely understand the challenges of being far away from university. As both, the author and participant experienced, they were able to build a solid communication with each other. It was easier to socialize due similarity of distance learning experiences (Núñez& Cuisia-Villanueva, 2020). A compact network of university peers helps breakdown the wall of isolation (Falloon, 2011) and create an environment for distance learner to share their experiences with those students in the same situation.

In addition, in this time of COVID-19 pandemic, this research can be used by learners who are experiencing isolation in online and distance learning. The experience will serve as the guidance on how they are going to battle isolation in the new normal of formal education. This will also serve to those living in rural areas or remote areas that getting a graduate education is also possible because there are more and more universities who have capability to offer distance mode of education.

Universities that offer distance learning mode of delivery shall also focus on student-to-student connection in order for them to collaborate and build online relationship. Connection in distance education shall not only be student-to-school, or student-to-content. It should be a wide spectrum of connection to address isolation and other related distance learning obstacles (Falloon, 2011).

Educational planners and teachers can use this as an anchor for them in providing distance learners the needed help not just academically but also through reaching out in any way possible so learners won't feel alone in this journey.

For the future researchers, this topic could be strengthened using comparative or quantitative research that will be conducted to onshore or offshore learners or with bigger number of involved participants. Furthermore, I encourage learners, educators, and researchers to continue to study on this topic and other related ideas that would help our learners overcome the hurdles of learning at a distance.

Acknowledgment

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