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

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ABSTRACT

In this research, the author presents the lived experience of a distance learner and how the participant has overcome the feeling of isolation. The participant of this qualitative phenomenological study is a graduate student of Visayas State University – Open University (VSU-OU). This qualitative phenomenological study seeks to measure in-depth experience of a distance learner and systematically analyze the culture of distance learning in order to understand the phenomenon and be able to share to future studies.

INTRODUCTION

The swift shift of educational setup and lesson delivery in the Philippines, due to COVID-19, has made educational institutions crumble to pivot from regular brick-and-mortar type of classes to total virtual and distance form of education. The education department is doing its everything in order to smoothly transition, thus focusing only on how schools are going to deliver the curriculum in different modes except the regular schooling pre-pandemic. In previous months, different academic organizations and schools conducted webinars about online teaching techniques, online or distance assessment methods, technology-dependent projects and many more to prepare the teachers in the new normal. This leaves the learners at the space without receiving any training on how they are going to perform as a distance or online learners.

The distance mode of education plays an important role in meeting the need of persons who are in great demand of education but can't complete their studies from the formal or regular system of education (Attri, 2012).

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In addition, distance learning is a constantly evolving method of education with specific features, on the grounds that distance learning students' study away from both the tutor and the educational organization (Vakoufari, Christina, & Mavroidis, 2014). The Web has had a resounding impact on education by both augmenting classroom activities and giving educators new ways to teach (Dickey, 2004). Since the age of the internet and the fast pace of the human race, the demand for skills and higher education soared at a far-reaching phase (Vonberg, 2015).

As the people get busier and the internet gets faster, learners have become more flexible in their learning styles. And with that schools and universities, with this changing phenomenon, have to adapt in order to meet needs (Rush, 2015). Most higher education institutions in each country have started offering learning in distance mode to fit on the hectic schedules of the learners. Online lesson design has moved from a specialized skill to one that's much more common, and in the right schools, a necessary skill (Lineberger, 2016). Distance education therefore works in a more flexible and friendly environment leading to improved balance between students' course work in their lives, reduces stress, and absenteeism (Badu-Nyarko, 2010).

Consequently, distance or online education is nothing without its issues and challenges, and one of them is on the student's part which is isolation (Chan and Lee, 2007). According to Cambridge Dictionary, isolation is: "the condition of being alone, especially when this makes you feel unhappy"; or "the fact that something is separate and not connected to other things"; or "the condition of being separated from other people, towns, countries, etc.". This definition is congruent to the study conducted by Mbukusa, Kibuule, & Lates, (2017) of University of Namibia. They mentioned that, isolation could be typified by time (concurrent study); space (geographic dispersal); social (awareness of others), intellectual/experience (academic ability and life experiences); profession (subject related expertise); ICT knowledge; sensory (ability to see/feel/hear peers); cultural; and subject (if anyone else is studying the same topic).

At most, higher education institutions' distance learners have the highest risk of dropping out of their programs of study. This can be attributed in large part to the isolation experienced by these students (Chan and Lee, 2007). They (Chan and Lee, 2007) added that students of all kinds want to have a sense of belonging to a larger university community, rather than simply being an enrollee, or worse, a part of statistics for the course.

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Burns (2016) mentioned that forty per cent (40%) of the learners globally have dropped out from the distance mode of education. One of the reasons Burns cited is the paradigm that learners have to study alone – hence "solo learner". Without a sense of connection, she added, learners' engagement decreases and eventually leaves or quits from the program. To add to that, the challenges of distance learning amplifies when learners are geographically isolated (Galusha, 1998). Galusha added that it will more complicate the results of the learning process for adult learners. In study conducted at the largest open university in India, Indira Ghandi National Open University (IGNOU), out of the top nine reasons of distance learners' withdrawal, according to the respondents, in the program is not being able to visit Study Centres or learning centers to attend various counselling and coaching, thus triggered their action (Fozdar, Kumar, & Kannan, 2006). According to Gillet-Swan (2017), some of the issues experienced can be personal such as: anxiety associated with using technology; being out of one's comfort zone; (perception of) inequity in assessment, particularly in "group" assignments; and, the (perceived) inability or difficulty in peer interaction, particularly in presentations.

A study conducted by Rush (2015), with one thousand and two (1,002) total of student respondents from University of Tasmania, Australia were identified as studying at a distance. Students were asked "What does isolation mean to you?", in the Likert- style explorations respondents mentioned that: "they feel out of the loop"; "feeling like you are not connected or have been forgotten"; "I feel like I'm the only one studying the subject"; and, "you feel like quite alone". In the same study, over half of the respondents said that the best aspect of being distance students was 'flexibility'. However, the respondents also mentioned that the worst part is the isolation and lack of contact (Bouhnik & Marcus, 2006). A study that is also congruent by the research conducted to the students of Zimbabwe Open University. In the study (Chinwanza, Mapuranga, Musingafi, Zebron, 2015), the authors mentioned that the delayed and ineffective feedback (lacking of contact) added burden to the learners which added to the existing struggles of being isolated.

On the other hand, a study done by Al-Harthi (2005), the author cited the students view isolation in a different way. The author cited those feelings of isolation and distance can evoke different meaning depending on the cultural orientation of the student. In the paper, the study conducted in a northwestern university in the U.S., students from Asia-Pacific were more concerned about the isolation from the instructors. It was mentioned that the said students view the instructors as 'figure of authority' and

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the person 'with answers' (Maliotaki, 2019). On the other hand, the European counterpart views isolation as the missed opportunity for discussions and debates.

In examining the following literature about the isolation, I have developed a one qualitative question to systematically process the experience of the participants of the study. This qualitative research paper will focus on the participant's experiences journey on overcoming the isolation of being distance/online learner. This study will answer only one qualitative research question: "How did you overcome the feeling of isolation in your distance education journey?"

METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

This study utilizes the qualitative type of research within the phenomenological tradition. According to Chambers (2013), phenomenology is an approach to qualitative research that focuses on the commonality of a lived experience within a particular group. The fundamental goal of the approach is to arrive at a description of the nature of the particular phenomenon (Lester, 1999). Typically, interviews are conducted with a group of individuals who have first-hand knowledge of an event, situation or experience (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, L., 2019).

The interview attempts to answer two broad questions: What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon? What contexts or situation have typically influenced your experiences of the phenomenon? Other forms of data such as documents, observations and art may also be used. The data is then read and reread and culled for like phrases and themes that are then grouped to form clusters of meaning. 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).

Since qualitative research celebrates subjectivity as compared to quantitative, which is objective, the participants need not to be more (n=1). Qualitative focuses more on the meaning and depth of the topic instead of occurrence among respondents (Saludadez, 2020).

The method used to collect pertinent data for the research is through in-depth interview. An audio call on Facebook Messenger was scheduled. Conversation was done in informal or friendly call, since both of them are friends. The interview lasted for almost an hour but it was cut into sessions due to poor connections on the

interviewee's side. The interview, also, was intermittently done through Messeger chats. The participant was asked questions in relation to the experience and isolation feelings as distance learner – hence the phenomenon.

PARTICIPANT

The participant of this mini-research is a distance student enrolled in one of the online master's degrees at the Visayas State University – Open University. Upon the request of the participant, the author withheld the identity of the interviewee. In this research, the participant will be instead referred as "Maria Santos".

Maria Santos is enrolled as a distance learner at VSU-OU. She started her journey as a distance education learner in 2019 prior pandemic. 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.

The setting of the study is conducted upon a student of VSU Open University. Visayas State University is a globally competitive university in the Philippines for science, technology, and environmental conservation which offers distance type of learning even before the pandemic. VSU-OU offers a non-thesis pure online master's degree. Master's in Agricultural Development majors in Agricultural Education, Agricultural Extension, Development Communication, and Language Teaching are a few of the degree courses the university offers. The program is offered in semesterly format and learners can be admitted even at a distance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

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 distance education can offer opted Maria to enroll instead turning into a regular classroom setup of learning.

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"The online programs of the university provide convenience given the fact that I live in the southern part of archipelago, in a rural area. This degree allows me to line my career in rural and agricultural development."

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."

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 (Lake, 1999). 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. I was so alone because far from the vicinity of the university. My classmates were from the locality and almost knew each other except me."

There was also a time when she quit for a semester and did not enroll because she felt like there was no connection with her peers (Ragusa and Crampton, 2018), plus the natural calamities in the region. She mentioned that:

"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 natural disaster situations around me."
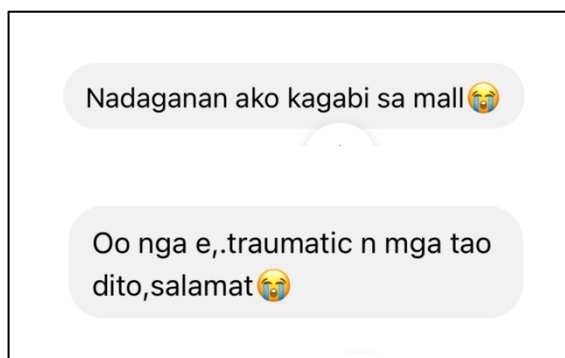
Nadaganan ako kagabi sa mall 😭

Oo nga e,.traumatic n mga tao dito,salamat 😭
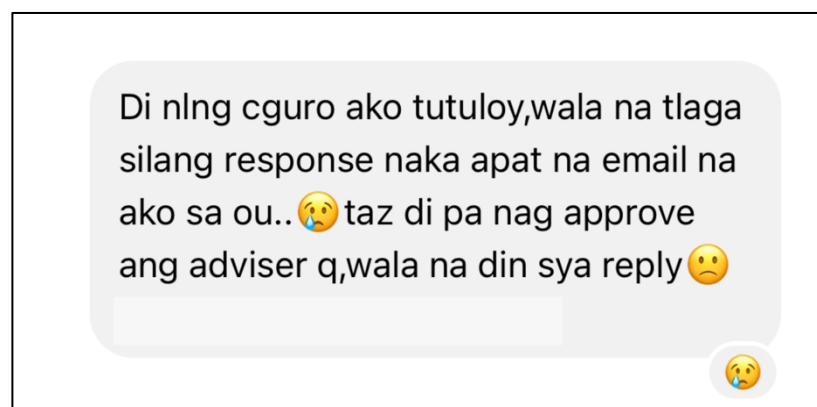
Figure 1.
An excerpt of our conversation about the earthquake happened.

Translation: "I was engulfed inside the mall. Yes. It was traumatic to all people here. Thanks."

Currently, the participant decided to continue her academic journey as distance learner. She explained 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 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."

"I know that you (Jayrome) also feel what I feel because we are in the same boat – distance learning."

Di nlng cguro ako tutuloy,wala na tlaga silang response naka apat na email na ako sa ou..😢taz di pa nag approve ang adviser q,wala na din sya reply🙁

😢

Figure 1.
An excerpt of our conversation about the feeling of quitting.

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Translation: "I think I won't continue anymore. Nobody replies on my emails. I sent email to the OU four times already. And my adviser has not approved my enrollment. No reply either."

RECOMMENDATIONS, CONCLUSIONS, AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

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 connection, both emotional (community of learners) and physical (internet). Mbukusa, Kibuule, & Lates (2017), mentioned that, isolation therefore can be overcome by ensuring that there is more and frequent communication to students.

A support group that caters, university-led or student organization, to the distance learners which are farther than the radius of universities would lessen the gap as compared to those who are in the same island. Timely, if not real-time, responses from queries may sound demanding but distance learners feel the belonginess and benefit with these type of conversations.

One of the most important steps that a distance learner could do to get over from isolation is to reach out to 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 DE learning experiences (Hughes, & Daykin, 2002). A good network of people will breakdown the wall of isolation (Falloon, 2011).

In addition, in this time of CoViD-19 pandemic, this research can be used by learners who will be transitioning from traditional brick-and-mortar mode to 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.

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For the future researchers, this topic could be strengthened using comparative research that will be conducted to onshore 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 – in any form.

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