I Work to Learn: The Lived Experiences of Working Students in Online Learning during COVID-19

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Abstract: COVID-19 resulted in a broader gap in economic and educational inequalities. The abrupt shift to online learning forced educational stakeholders in developing economies to revisit policies, strategies, and pedagogies to sustain education despite contemporary challenges. For some students, COVID-19 and online learning ushers in an unexpected opportunity: to continue pursuing their university degrees while maintaining their job. In this phenomenological inquiry, we approached working university students in the Philippines to explore their lived experiences during COVID-19 in their roles as students and workers. Guided by the Self-determination Theory, our analysis revealed three prominent themes that motivate this specific group of learners: learn asynchronously, acquire support and engage socially.

Keywords: Online learning, motivations, self-determination theory, COVID-19, working students

1. Introduction

Equity to access in education is a formidable challenge in developing economies made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic. Closures of higher educational institutions, restrictions on mobility, and the threat of infection have led to a crisis in the learning community necessitating drastic changes in the way education is delivered (Brand, 2020; Joaquin et al., 2020; Wilcha, 2020). In developed economies, financial support from the government is widely available, enabling university students to sustain their education (Barada et al., 2020; Helin et al., 2020). However, in developing economies, these opportunities are limited, resulting in some students discontinuing their studies for financial reasons (Auger et al., 2020; Onyema, 2020). This sudden shift to the online learning environment is an opportunity to close this gap as this will allow university students to learn and work at the same continually. However, past research has identified the lack of motivation among university students as a critical challenge to online learning during COVID-19 (Aboagye et al., 2020; Rahiem, 2021).

Given the vital role of motivations among learners, we conducted a phenomenological inquiry into the lives and experiences of working university students in the Philippines. This study aims to uncover the primary motivators of this specific group of students in using online learning during COVID-19 through a phenomenological inquiry. We analyzed the results of our interview through thematic analysis to identify significant themes in their experiences during COVID-19. In the following sections, we discuss related studies, explain the theoretical lens which guided our inquiry, outline our methodology and highlight the results of our investigation.

2. Literature and Theoretical Framework

The role of technology in addressing widespread inequality in university education has been remarkable. Through online learning, students can gain knowledge at their most comfortable time, pace and space. While primarily geared towards learning, this flexibility allows financially challenged students to seek employment to sustain their education. For some, the asynchronous features of online

learning are instrumental in balancing the demands of their career, family, and student lives (Blackmon & Major, 2012). Along with flexibility, the convenience of online learning through immediate access to course modules and personalized study time is one of the salient motivators of working students (Benson et al., 2012). In low-income economies, maintaining their job while studying to earn a university degree was the most important determining factor of online learning (Boateng, 2015). While benefits appear to be prominent in literature, attrition rates of working students remain a challenge. Innovative interventions such as mentoring, peer feedback, and financial flexibility to improve retention are effective strategies to encourage continued education among working students (Lu, 2018). Compared to the traditional delivery of classes, online learning offers working students greater control over the demands of their varying roles, achieving work-life balance through technology and connectivity (Berry & Hughes, 2020)

Worldwide, COVID-19 reshaped the online delivery of university education. Safety concerns and mobility restrictions forced learning institutions to transition to a fully online learning modality to ensure that education continues (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). While technology is instrumental in responding to the pandemic challenges, this sudden shift also brought forward disparities in access to technology-supported education, especially to low-income students (Barada et al., 2020). Issues such as overwhelming lesson content, overall well-being, and lack of interaction in the conduct of online learning during COVID-19 remain (Ismail et al., 2021; Rahiem, 2021; Teräs et al., 2020). Some students also suffered economic difficulties, and some universities have responded by providing more flexibility in their policies, pedagogy, and course offerings to show support (Helin et al., 2020). Motivations are crucial to ensure that learning continues for those students who suffer various difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic (Baticulon et al., 2021; Rahiem, 2021).

Extraordinary challenges encountered by working university students during COVID-19 require a delicate balance of maintaining overall well-being, reaching academic goals, and meeting the workplace demands. As such, their motivations to continue learning despite difficulties can be explained by the Self-Determination Theory or SDT by Deci and Ryan (1985). Central to the epistemological underpinnings of the SDT are the three tenets of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy is the perception of being in control of the tasks at hand, is voluntary, and contends that attainment of goals is guided primarily by intrinsic motivations. On the other hand, competence argues that a person's behavior in reaching their goals depends on their ability to assess their skills, knowledge, and mastery that can improve through feedback. Connectedness is the need by a person to belong where relationships with others in a social group can foster access to support to reach goals and aspirations. While it is argued that the degree to which one values each dimension of SDT varies, having these three motivational drivers can lead to the achievement of personal goals and objectives (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). The flexibility, technological advantage, and various affordances of the online learning environment have been explained by prior studies using SDT, making it a suitable theoretical foundation in explicating the findings of this investigation (Chen & Jang, 2010; Martin et al., 2018; Rahiem, 2021).

3. Methodology

A phenomenological qualitative inquiry was utilized in this study to examine the lived realities of our participants intensively by uncovering more profound insights into students' experiences in online learning during COVID-19 through semi-structured interviews. We approached faculty members in 2 universities based in the Philippines for possible participants. A total of 9 students, currently enrolled in a university degree program and currently working full-time agreed to participate in the study. Informed consent, anonymization, and privacy measures were explained before the interviews. All students are above the minority age and none of them are students of any of the researchers. In Table 1, we present the participants' profiles and their respective jobs.

Table 1. *Participants' Profiles*

Participant	Gender	Age	Program	Job
1	Male	25	Hospitality	Restaurant Staff
2	Female	34	Business	Executive Assistant
3	Male	23	Business	Real Estate Agent
4	Male	22	Information Technology	IT Staff
5	Male	26	Finance	Grab Driver
6	Female	25	Information Technology	Restaurant Staff
7	Male	26	Information Technology	Office Staff
8	Male	22	Engineering	Grab Driver
9	Female	27	Information Technology	Office Secretary

Using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2018), codes are applied to portions of the interview transcripts that represent meanings through the excerpting feature of Dedoose (Andalibi & Flood, 2021; Talanquer, 2014). A preliminary codebook was developed based on the SDT and prior studies investigating the experiences of university students in online learning to guide the researchers in identifying meanings and matching the corresponding codes (Berry & Hughes, 2020; Chen & Jang, 2010; Robosa et al., 2021). The codes in the codebook were iteratively updated and renamed as researchers analyzed data. Similarities, patterns, and contradictions were noted through reflections and written using the memo feature of Dedoose to arrive at the final themes of the data analysis. To provide a more detailed representation of our findings, we selected three exemplars from the interview transcript. We invited 2 participants (Participant 2 and Participant 7) for a Zoom session to discuss our data interpretation to validate our findings. Aligned with the trustworthiness criteria, we utilized interview protocols, codebook, transcription, consensus code application, and member-checking to ensure validity and reliability in our study (Nowell et al., 2017).

4. Results

Based on the analysis of the interview data, a total of 8 codes grouped into three final themes were uncovered. In Table 2, we present how these codes are clustered into themes, their frequency in the data, and the respective participants they were excerpted from. According to the participants, their motivations for using online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic are 1) Learn asynchronously, 2) Acquire support, and 3) Engage socially.

Table 2. *Themes and Codes*

Participant	Codes	Frequency	Participant Occurrence
Learn asynchronously	Learning while working	7	1,2,4,5,6,7,8
	Anytime learning	7	1,3,5,6,7,8,9
	Personalized pace	4	1,4,5,9
Acquire support	Anytime university and teacher support	6	2,3,4,7,8,9
	Instant feedback	8	1,2,3,4,5,7,8,9
Engage socially	Making new friends	4	1,6,7,9
	Peer collaboration	5	1,2,4,8,9
	Sharing experiences	5	1,3,4,7,8

4.1 Learn Asynchronously

Our findings suggest that asynchronous learning is well accepted by working university students. In the context of COVID-19 and its impact on developing economies, working students rely heavily on their job income to sustain their studies. Some students shared that they access their online courses at work and home. Some of their employers understood the challenges of online learning and allowed

them to study in their workplaces during their break times. Through asynchronous learning, students can commit to their job responsibilities while meeting school requirements. The flexibility of online learning meant that they could study course modules at their own pace and attend to their various assessments. This theme aligns with the concept of autonomy in SDT, as students are given more choices leading to responsibility and autonomy (Martin et al., 2018). Some of the selected excerpts for Theme 1 - Learn asynchronously are:

"When I am busy at work, I cannot attend live classes. When I get home, I open my laptop and start studying the lessons for that day" – (Participant 7, Code: Anytime learning)

"I have no idea what asynchronous means until COVID-19. When my university shifted online, I was surprised that I have the option to study at my own pace as long as I meet the deadline" - (Participant 9, Code: Personalized pace)

"I asked my boss if I can stay beyond office hours since the Internet is stable at work, and it is more suitable for learning. At home I need to compete with my children for Internet since they are also studying like me." - (Participant 2, Code: Learning while working)

4.2 Acquire Support

Our second theme implies that the various support mechanisms available in an online learning environment are vital to sustaining the motivations of working university students. Acknowledging the adverse effects on students' psychological well-being during COVID-19, various academic institutions have instituted online support services, including library resources, counseling services, and academic consultation sessions (Sahu, 2020; Son et al., 2020). The limited-time they spend on campus will render access to these support services difficult as working students. For some students, directly messaging their teachers for clarifications on their assessments was useful. Other features that the participants appreciate are instant feedback on assessment and knowing their current progress in a specific course. Consistent with the proposition of SDT on competence, timely feedback and extended support to learners establish awareness of progress, allowing them to set challenging but achievable goals (Martin et al., 2018; Rahiem, 2021). Some of the selected excerpts for Theme 2 – Acquire support are:

"...my teacher gives me feedback immediately and suggests how I can improve my paper through the direct message feature of our platform…" – (Participant 5, Code: Instant feedback)

"After my synchronous class, I remain in Zoom to ask if I understood the lesson correctly" – (Participant 1, Code: Instant feedback)

"...in the main page, my university made available an appointment system for our library. I was assisted when I was looking for a specific textbook for my class even when it was late at night…" – (Participant 4, Code: Anytime university and teacher support)

4.3 Engage Socially

Our last theme infers the need to establish social engagements through online learning as an essential motivator. Past studies have shown that specific types of students are less attached to the university community as they will have different priorities aside from socially interacting with others from campus (Cotton et al., 2017; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). In the COVID era, social interactions have become online, resulting in opportunities to establish new friendships, interact with classmates, and foster collaboration. Some students shared that they look forward to group projects as this will involve opportunities to interact with others. For some, breakout rooms during synchronous classes foster openness as they can share personal things about their lives. Congruent with the human need to belong to SDT, social engagement fosters a sense of community belongingness. Students become motivated to learn as more opportunities to establish new or cultivate existing relationships in their learning community (Martin et al., 2018; Rahiem, 2021). Some of the selected excerpts for Theme 2 – Engage socially are:

"I used to be a loner in school since I usually leave the campus immediately after class for work. Because of online projects I need to work with classmates. They add me in Facebook for better communication and we have become friends"– (Participant 6, Code: Making new friends)

"At work, I am used to working with teams. I apply my experience in deliverables that require working with others"– (Participant 4, Code: Peer collaboration)

"..my younger classmates ask me about my work. I feel fulfilled whenever I share my professional experience"- (Participant 3, Code: Sharing experiences)

5. Conclusion

In this phenomenological inquiry to the lived realities of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, we found three key motivations: learn asynchronously, acquire support and engage socially. While developing economies struggled to ensure quality and continued learning despite challenges in resources during and beyond COVID-19, stakeholders of higher learning should also understand that among students, groups with varying needs exist. Therefore, strategies to ensure meaningful learning experiences should be implemented. Within the context of this study, working university students bring hope to developing economies as they are current contributors to the economy as part of the workforce with better job prospects upon graduation.

The findings of this study also demand a revisit of how educational institutions implement online learning. Activities that foster social engagements online, supportive teachers, and the various technological features that encourage collaboration are critical considerations that will establish a sustained and meaningful learning environment for working students. The importance of asynchronous learning was also highlighted in this study. We found that flexibility and convenience through this modality strike a balance between work and school among our participants. Considering these factors ensures that despite managing multiple roles of a student and as a worker in a difficult time such as COVID-19, this specific group of university students will remain motivated to continue learning to reach their personal goals.

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