

Unraveling the Lived-Experiences of Faculty Members in Higher Education on Flexible Learning during the COVID19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Teachers bear the brunt of this burden more than any other stakeholder when it comes to flexible learning. During the COVID19 Pandemic, this study delves into the personal experiences of faculty members working in higher education who were involved in flexible learning. This study utilized the qualitative component of the study, and its primary focus was on determining the lived experiences of the teachers in regards to the implementation of flexible learning. For the purpose of accomplishing this, descriptive phenomenology was utilized. This research was carried out throughout all eight campuses that make up Cagayan State University (CSU). The actual experiences of the faculty who took part in the survey revealed three primary themes with regards to the implementation of flexible learning. The first subject discusses the benefits of having flexible learning options, while the second theme delves into the difficulties associated with having those options. The final topic focuses on the decisions they made as a result of the difficulties they encountered. The unanticipated change to flexible learning that the faculty members were had to make as a consequence of the pandemic led in a wide range of conflicting emotions and narratives that were expressed through their lived experiences with flexible learning.

Keyword: lived-experiences, flexible learning, higher education, COVID19 pandemic,

Introduction

Faculty members and school officials at Cagayan State University (CSU) were caught off guard when flexible learning was implemented at the institution. The "senior" faculty members and those members of the teaching staff who were not technologically inclined exhibited the greatest immediate resistance to the change. They may not have received any training in online teaching, and they may not have any modules that are ready to upload. Both of these factors may be contributing to the resistance. Some people, in an effort to better manage their flexible learning, have turned to several online platforms for help, including Facebook Messenger, Learning Management Systems, Microsoft Teams, Schoology, and Moodle. During this time, the administrators of the school were unprepared to supply the necessary learning management system to carry out the flexible learning. Because so many students and staff members use the university's software resources for online classes, it was necessary for the university to modernize those resources so that it could keep up with the demand.

For many years, people have been using the phrase "flexible learning" in a broad sense. However, in recent years, there has been a tendency toward using the phrase in a manner that is more defined and technical. According to Collis and Moonen (2002), flexible learning is more than just distant learning, and its guiding premise is that students should be at the center of numerous parts of the educational experience they are having. In the meantime, according to the draft proposal of CHED on the implementing guidelines on flexible learning to be used by public and private HEIs, flexible learning is the design and delivery of programs, courses, and learning interventions that address the unique needs of learners in terms of place, pace, process, and products of learning. These guidelines are intended to be used by public and private HEIs. It encompasses both face-to-face/in-person learning and out-of-classroom learning modes of delivery or a combination of modes of delivery and incorporates the use of digital and non-digital technology. It makes it possible to maintain education that is both accessible and inclusive even in situations where it would be impossible to employ more conventional methods of instruction, such as in the event of a national emergency (CHED, 2020).

According to Russell & Cumming (2011), flexible learning should be centered on the notion of learner choices, which states that students should have the ability to choose how they want to study their courses. Educators need to be ready to guide students in making good decisions and provide them with direction regarding effective instructional strategies if they want their students to achieve their goals. The task of establishing teaching strategies and instructional resources that are truly aligned with the philosophy of flexible learning falls most heavily on teachers. Flexible learning imposes this weight on teachers more than any other stakeholder. However, the importance of the role that school administrators play cannot be overstated because they are the ones that supply

both the soft and the hard structures that are required for its execution. According to Tucker & Morris (2012), major components or dimensions of flexibility include delivery methodologies, a learner-centered approach, and the importance of resource-based learning. This highlights the responsibility of teachers in promoting the choices that learners make.

The first academic quarter has come to a conclusion at most schools. This indicates that educators were able to undergo a substantial paradigm change in their pedagogical practice as a direct result of the implementation of flexible learning. The most important question, however, is as follows: "Did the change in their teaching practice advance toward flexibility, or was it just a substitution of the previous ways for "just getting everything online?" While many educators claim to have implemented flexible learning in its purest form, Temple (2007) contends that the techniques of instruction they utilize are more suited to the more traditional face-to-face classroom environment. This is despite the fact that many educators have used flexible learning. In such a scenario, instructors could engage in activities that run counter to the flexible learning approach that was meant to be followed or that was anticipated to be followed (Cooper, 2001). In addition, Torneo et al. (2020) came to the conclusion that the majority of higher education institutions in the Philippines have only a limited amount of experience with flexible learning, and that only a minor majority include flexible learning into their university policy.

The data collected from the lived experiences of students and faculty members throughout the implementation of flexible learning provides baseline information that has the potential to serve as significant input for enhancing the flexible learning program at the university. In particular, the lived experiences of students might disclose structures that may explain the failures and triumphs of flexible learning as a novel mode in the teaching and learning process in higher education institutions.

In light of the background information presented here, it is of the utmost importance to investigate the levels of expertise and practical experience held by the teaching staff with regard to online education. The accomplishment of this task will result in a meaningful contribution to the process of determining the training requirements that faculty members must fulfill in order to successfully implement flexible learning at the university.

Statement of the Problem

1. What are the respondents' lived experiences in implementing the flexible learning?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study used the qualitative component of the study revolved around determining the lived experiences of the teachers in implementing flexible learning. In doing this, descriptive phenomenology was employed. This study design is used in describing how human beings experience a certain phenomenon. In doing this, the researcher identified themes and generalizations in relation to how flexible learning is perceived or experienced by the teachers.

Locale of the Study

This study was conducted in the eight campuses of Cagayan State University (CSU). The university was created by Presidential Decree 1436, subsequently amended by Republic Act No. 8292 by integrating all higher education institutions in the province of Cagayan that were publicly funded. Its eight campuses are strategically located in the three congressional districts of Cagayan; the campuses of Aparri, Lal-Lo and Gonzaga in the 1st District; the campuses of Piat, Lasam and Sanchez-Mira in the 2nd District; and the campuses of Andrews and Carig in Tuguegarao City in the 3rd District.

Respondents and Sampling Procedure

The members of the permanent faculty of the CSU who were employed at each of the university's campuses were the individuals who took part in the study. Participants in the study required to be faculty members who had an equivalent teaching load (ETL) of more than nine (9) units to be considered for inclusion. The table that follows includes both the population estimates and the sample sizes that were computed for each individual campus. This table can be found further down the page. The size of the sample, 217, was determined by using the population, which consisted of 474 members of the faculty. In total, there were 474 members of the faculty who were able to

demonstrate that they met the inclusion criteria. The selection of respondents on each campus was performed by using a random sample approach with the faculty roster that was obtained from the Office of the Campus Registrars. This roster was used to create a random sample.

Table 1. Distribution of the Respondents by Campus

Campus	Faculty	
	Population	Sample
Andrews	173	79
Aparri	39	18
Carig	172	79
Gonzaga	11	5
Lallo	6	3
Lasam	12	5
Piat	28	13
Sanchez Mira	33	15
TOTAL	474	217

In the meantime, fifteen (15) study participants were chosen to participate in the in-depth interview based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria that were outlined below. To begin, we will examine which members of the faculty received the greatest and lowest ratings in the knowledge section regarding flexible learning. Second, they gave the impression that they were willing to take part in the in-depth interview. Third, they had both sufficient and insufficient information and communication technology resources and training, in addition to flexible learning. The researcher adhered to the idea of data saturation, according to which the collection of data came to an end once it was determined that no new information had been discovered and that it had become apparent that there was redundancy in the data.

Research Instrument

The interview guide was the instrument that was employed, and it was responsible for collecting the participants' lived experiences. It elicited their experiences, struggles, and obstacles, as well as their coping mechanisms, regarding the adoption of flexible learning. Before being used for the data gathering process, each of the instruments was carefully examined by professionals with expertise in assessment and evaluation to ensure that they were legitimate in both appearance and substance.

Data Gathering Procedure

Following receipt of authorization from the office of the University President, the researcher forwarded the request letter to the various Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of the campuses and the Deans of the academic colleges. During this time, the researcher was doing an in-depth analysis of the replies received from faculty members regarding their personal experiences with the implementation of flexible learning. This was accomplished by having video conversations with each person who took part in the study. The video chat, which elicited the personal narratives of the respondents regarding the implementation of flexible learning, lasted for almost an hour.

Discussions of Results and Findings

Lived Experiences of the Participants in Implementing Flexible Learning

The lived experiences of the study participants showed three major themes relative to the implementation of flexible learning. The first theme relates to the joy of flexible learning while the second theme reveals the challenges of flexible learning. The third theme reflects their resolutions based on the challenges they experienced.

As regards the joys of flexible learning, three sub-themes emerged. Firstly, *Flexible learning is a functional approach to continue teaching and learning in the new normal*. The study participants are one with the idea that flexible learning is one and best way to continue learning in the new normal. With the pandemic, the only solution to continue teaching and learning is to have flexible learning. In a way, teachers and students are able to carry out their tasks without academic freeze. Such is articulated by one study participant in these words: *With flexible learning, we can cater to the needs of our students especially during these times when we are confronted with a lot of restrictions and protocols brought by the pandemic. Without flexible learning, we may have adopted academic freeze. [R9]*.

Moreover, one participant expressed the benefits experienced that flexible learning brought to her life. She said: *I am comfortable with my flexible class because I can work on checking, recording of scores and preparing power points during asynchronous classes. In the beginning, I was hesitant using the technology for my online classes. But when I had a feel of it, I personally liked and enjoyed it [R5]*. Another functional benefit of flexible learning was the teachers' control of time. With flexible learning, they can do household chores and attend to their children's needs while conducting asynchronous classes. As succinctly narrated by one participant: *Flexible learning for me is interesting especially that you have control with your time. You can just upload the topics you made and update your students for them to have an access and check it online. With this, I can do my household chores and attend to my children who are also doing their modules [R6]*.

The second sub-theme under the joys of flexible of learning is *Flexible learning developed transformational behavior of compassion, patience, understanding and flexibility among teachers*. Many study participants agree that they learned several virtues in their flexible learning classes. To them, these virtues are life-changing, and they never thought that they have the opportunities to have these experiences with their years of teaching. One study participant has this to say: *It takes a lot of patience and time management to be able to help the students have thorough understanding of the topics in each course. I realized I became more patient and compassionate as I see the struggles of my students in coping with online classes. As a teacher, it just needs a lot of understanding and patience to be successful in conducting flexible learning [R2]*. Congruently, some study participants became very understanding with the submission of requirements. They usually see the harshness of their students in submitting their outputs. This study participant expressed this thought in these words: *When it comes to attitude, I have to adjust in terms of time. There are students who cannot meet the deadline of submission because some are working. And as a teacher, I need to understand them and have patience [R5]*.

The third sub-theme under the joy of flexible learning is *Flexible learning provides numerous advantages for teachers and students*. With flexible learning, the participants expressed that they do not get tired in transferring from one classroom to another. Those who have scheduled appointments just record their lectures and post them online or forward them to the students through their learning platforms. One participant affirmed this concept in this statement: *First, you don't get tired in hopping from one classroom to another. Second, you may just record your lecture and post it online. You don't have to worry if your students are naughty. You don't have to worry about bullying and misbehavior. You may modify your lesson content, deadlines, activities, assignments, too [R2]*.

A significant advantage experienced by the participants was the navigation of different learning resources for their synchronous and asynchronous classes. To facilitate teaching and learning, they learned and used learning platforms such as MS teams, LENS, google meet and zoom. Also, they downloaded materials such as YouTube and sample modules to enrich their lessons. In the narrative of one participant, he said: *I was able to explore different learning resources and prepare my learning materials that suit my students' needs and can teach without going to school especially this pandemic. I also learned new learning platforms which are interesting and exciting. I'm proud to say that I already know how to record my lectures in zoom [R10]*.

With respect to the major theme along challenges of flexible learning, the thematic analysis uncovered three sub-themes namely: (a) The implementation of flexible learning is technically challenging for both teachers and students; (b) Flexible learning is dependent on the teachers' adaptability, commitment, and willingness to learn new technology; and (c) Transitioning from face-to-face to flexible learning is an arduous journey for both teachers and students.

The challenges experienced by the teachers was on internet connectivity as well as long response time to students' queries and late submission of outputs. Also, they experienced technical problems in fulfilling synchronous classes and difficulty in checking softcopy outputs of students leading to their eye strain. Interestingly, they also expressed their casual relationship with their students as they do not know them personally. Many students do not turn on their cameras to save cost of data and many do not participate during class discussions. The narrations of the participants reflect these challenges:

Often, we encounter problems on connectivity, and students struggle on load budget. These cause delay of the discussion and abrupt dismissal of classes [R1].

One challenge of flexible learning is that it needs a lot of time and effort to respond to students' queries. Many of them send numerous messages in the chat box even at night time. This is the reason why I set rules and regulations for the students to follow but at the same time, I still need to show understanding and consideration. I gave them chances once or twice but not the third time around [R4].

With prolonged exposure to computer, sometimes I experienced headache and eye strain. This is much experienced whenever I check the softcopy outputs of my students and have straight synchronous classes R6.

On the sub-theme, *Flexible learning is dependent on the teachers' adaptability, commitment, and willingness to learn new technology*, it was expressed that the teachers' success in flexible learning is principally attributed to their level of adaptability. This is especially disclosed by older faculty members who are not ICT proficient. For them, they need to learn and be abreast of technology because they will be left behind if they are close-minded on learning new platforms. As expressed by one participant: *I am not good in computers and I was never exposed to online learning before. With my age, I think I have to learn new things and redo my old way thinking. I need to be adaptable and little by little learn new skills to fulfill my functions as a teacher in the new normal.*[R8]

Meanwhile, some participants revealed that the effectiveness and meaningfulness of their flexible learning classes is dependent on their level of commitment. Without commitment, they would not teach well and students would not also learn in return. Admittedly, flexible learning is difficult and everyone is affected by it. If a teacher does not show commitment to his profession, then nothing good among students will happen. Such is reflected in the statements of one participant in these words: *Today's teaching is very difficult and everyone is affected by it. Teachers and students are adjusting to the requirements of synchronous and asynchronous classes. As a teacher, I have to embrace these challenges and this can only be done when a teacher shows commitment to his teaching. If all you do is to complain, you will end up accomplishing nothing. I think one of the best things that the pandemic has given to teachers is it tested their commitment that irrespective of all the unkind situations, they need to continue working and touching the lives of students.* [R9]

As regards the sub-theme on *Transitioning from face-to-face to flexible learning is an arduous journey for both teachers and students*, the participants recognized the large gap needed to be filled in when the university suddenly shifted to flexible learning. The journey in bridging that gap have required transformations on physical infrastructures, classroom climate and teaching styles, among others. Such can be inferred from the statement of one study participant who said: *The inability of the learners and teachers to adjust into flexible learning is a hindrance to the success of flexible learning approach. It is to be stressed that prior to the pandemic, flexible learning was not a mainstream approach used by most HEIs, hence, majority of the learners and teachers are still struggling to adjust to flexible learning approach* [R4]. Moreover, as teachers and learners continue to become accustomed with flexible learning, physical and mental stress are inevitable challenges. A faculty has this to say: *Mental state is at stake because at times it becomes stressful discussing with students their concerns* [R10]. In a similar vein, a teacher mentioned: *Teachers spend more time (extends beyond work hours) on instructional material development and giving assessment feedbacks which puts their health at risk* [R5].

Lastly, in relation to the third major theme, *Resolutions on Flexible Learning Challenges*, three sub-themes surfaced out from the analysis of the responses of the study participants: a) *Undertook formal and informal trainings on flexible learning*; b) *Obtained Optimistic view*; c) *Sought help from other people*; and d) *Upgraded technology resources*. These sub-themes are the coping mechanisms of the faculty members as they continue to adapt to a flexible learning environment.

On the sub-theme, *undertook formal and informal training on flexible learning*, the study participants expressed that attendance of faculty to trainings are crucial in their professional development as implementers of flexible learning. Since they just learned about the new formal and informal online platforms, they grabbed every opportunity to upgrade their competency. Aside from the trainings conducted by the university, they availed of online of the online seminars and trainings. Also, they asked colleagues who are knowledgeable about the platforms to tutor them. One faculty member emphasized this point through these words: *More than anything else, I attended online seminar and training to continue my immersion in a flexible learning environment. I retooled myself relative to the principles of flexible learning because we might be thinking we are doing the right thing but in actuality, we are not* [R6]. Similarly, one faculty member became specific as to the trainings he underwent: *Actually, content-wise, I have no problem. However, in terms of how I deliver my content, that's the problem. So, I attended trainings on MSTeams, Edmodo and other educational technology, and assessment in flexible learning* [R2].

Furthermore, the study revealed that one coping mechanism of teachers during these times was *obtaining an optimistic view*. The teachers agreed that with the uncertainties that surrounds them, having a positive outlook is indispensable. The concept of "all is well" and "everything shall come to pass" highlights the responses of the study participants. For example, one study participant expressed using these words: *Life is too short to force ourselves in controlling the uncontrollable. I think as teachers in the new normal, we should free ourselves from the rigidity that we used to have. If you allow yourself to be stressed on students not passing their requirements on time, wrinkles will grow all over your face. All of us are in hard times. Just think of that* [R9].

Meanwhile, the third sub-theme showing the respondents' coping mechanism was *seeking help from other people*. It is revealed from the study that one of the ways by which they have surmounted the challenges of flexible learning was seek help from other people like their children, friends, and colleagues. Such is reflected in the narrative of one study participant who said: *During these times, I saw the value of "learning to live together". I frequently encounter problems in using my computer and fortunately, my colleagues are just one call away. They willingly assisted me in troubleshooting my computer [R1]*. Additionally, one senior faculty member narrated: *At home, I am both a teacher and a student. I teach my engineering students online from my desk but behind the scenes were my children coaching me on what to press on my computer. It's hard but what choice do I have? Luckily, my beautiful daughters are with me during my online classes. They even bought a ring light for me [R10]*.

Lastly, *having upgraded technology resources* is one of the resolutions of the faculty members on the challenges brought by flexible learning. Many teachers complained about lagging computers and unstable internet connections. These problems disappointed and demotivated them at the same point in continuing their online teaching. This is evident from the narrative of one study participant. He said: *My computer's processor is so slow, I can barely edit a 10-second video in Filmora. That is why, I use my phone instead. It's even faster than my computer. I wish the university will provide us laptops [R1]*. In order to avoid these problems, some faculty members availed the computer loan program of GSIS and other educational loan programs of banks in order to buy upgraded devices. One faculty member has this to say: *I'm not ashamed to share that I availed the computer loan program of GSIS to buy myself a fast computer. Now I can teach online with ease. Faster internet na lang ang kulang [R7]*.

Conclusion

The unexpected transition to flexible learning that the faculty members had to make as a result of the pandemic resulted in a variety of conflicting emotions and narratives that were articulated through their lived experiences with flexible learning.

Recommendation

1. It is necessary to offer the proposed training design to CSU management for the purpose of prospective acceptance, in particular by the University Training Office, which is responsible for the ongoing professional development of the teaching staff.
2. Faculty members who have a connection to the internet that is poor or weak are strongly urged to enhance their WiFi connection because this may have a substantial impact on the knowledge they have regarding flexible learning.
3. Because male faculty members and those who are older tend to have less knowledge on instructional strategies and resources in flexible learning, it is suggested that male faculty members and those who are older should be given priority in terms of capacity building in flexible learning because they require more assistance in comparison to their counterparts.
4. It is recommended to conduct another study in the same vein, but this time with the students as the primary emphasis, as they are the ones who benefit most from flexible learning.

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