Learning Difficulties and Coping Mechanisms of Education Students in the Shift to Flexible Learning Modality amidst COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Coping is a mental process that hopes to reduce or diminish stress. It may work on a conscious or unconscious level is determined by personality traits, personal characteristics, and resilience. Levels of adaptation are unique and can never be the same for two people. As educational institutions struggle to continue despite the ensuing COVID-19 Pandemic, online resources, learning management systems, synchronous and asynchronous teaching and learning modalities, blended and flexible learning, and a thousand different online applications and platforms were sought to facilitate the delivery of quality education still. The sudden shift to the new normal in education brought difficulties to students, teachers, administrators, and all education stakeholders. This quantitative research investigated the learning difficulties and coping mechanisms of 166 Education students of Aurora State College of Technology in the shift to flexible learning modality. The researcher used the questionnaire to identify the learning difficulties and the coping mechanisms of the respondents. The study utilized frequency count, percentage, and weighted mean. It is interesting to note that with the sudden shift to flexible learning modality, the respondents experience

moderate difficulty as to Content (WM=3.0), performance tasks (WM=2.8), and summative tests (WM=2.9). Furthermore, concerning the experienced learning difficulties, respondents do cope-up with a medium amount (WM=3.3). That the most valuable coping strategies amidst the ensuing Pandemic are the following: developing new learning styles and habits, utilization of technology that can aid learning, and committing oneself to discipline, commitment, and purpose. It is recommended that the findings of this research be used to identify research gaps and explore learning theories and principles for the improvement of the existing teaching and learning pedagogies responsive to the new normal education.

INTRODUCTION

Coping is a mental process that hopes to reduce or diminish stress (Naughton, 1997). It may work on a conscious or unconscious level and is determined by personality traits (Hewitt & Flett, 1996), personal characteristics (de Ridder & Kerssens, 2003), and resilience (Glennie, 2010). Levels of adaptation are personal and can never be the same for two people. As educational institutions struggle to continue despite the ensuing COVID-19 Pandemic, online resources, learning management systems, synchronous and asynchronous teaching and learning modalities, blended and flexible learning, and a thousand different online applications and platforms were sought to facilitate still the delivery of quality education (Ng et al., 2020). However, the sudden shift to the new normal in education has brought difficulties and stresses to students, teachers, administrators, parents, and all education stakeholders (Bhamani et al., 2020).

The opening of 2020 is difficult for the Pandemic COVID-19 forced all institutions, government, and private to follow the community quarantine implemented by the government. These community quarantine protocols hope to contain the virus and prevent community transmission. Classes in colleges and universities were ended (Baloran, 2020). As agencies develop contingency plans, they issue memoranda on pre/post COVID interventions. They implemented health protocols, stranded students were sent back to their homes, and extended support. This support came from the college, the national government, and other institutions. Only the skeleton staff reports in their respective offices to facilitate the timely giving of salaries to employees, planning initiatives, and maintenance/upkeep of the college facilities.

With a continuous increase in the number of infected individuals, COVID-19 Pandemic brought every individual emotional, psychological, financial, spiritual, and even physical challenges. The fear brought by the Pandemic is monstrous that aside from emotional, psychological, economic stresses, it also got the people into extreme poverty and job loss. Hunger and starvation, especially among the daily wage earners, became a familiar story that tested the people's resiliency.

The new educational setup caught teachers, parents, students, and all other stakeholders of education unprepared. A series of problems arose: internet connectivity, teacher preparedness and training related to distance learning, facilities, budget, and parents' readiness to facilitate homeschooling. Students cope with the mental challenges and learning difficulties brought by the shift to flexible learning modalities (Baloran, 2020).

Educational institutions begin to resume their operations even on a limited basis. This is due to the loosened community quarantine protocols. The Education Department still monitors and supervises the activity of its faculty members through different memoranda. These serve as a guide regarding post-Covid-19 interventions and to plan for the next school year. Movement in the Low-risk MGCQ areas was allowed; this enables the department to prepare for its strategies concerning the admission and registration of students. The faculty members attended a series of webinars, especially on utilizing online resources and applications that can help facilitate flexible/blended learning among our students.

Despite the ensuing Pandemic, the Education Department of Aurora State College of Technology persisted in still delivering its services to the students by adopting Flexible Learning Modalities appropriate to the conditions and circumstances of our clientele. The department conducted mobile pre-registration, online verifications/transactions were allowed, extended enrolment with the deadline to complete students' requirements and grades. The memo of the College President regarding Post-COVID 19 interventions was still in effect so as not to aggravate the economic, physical, psychological, emotional, and mental impact of the pandemic on the students (Galea et al., 2020). The department also conducted a series of webinars, and giving consideration became the policy in dealing with non-submission, delay, and non-compliance of the students in their enrolled subjects (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020).

There is a need for a response in collaboration with stakeholders of education. As the Philippines reinvent the educational landscape in a time of Pandemic, teachers' preparedness, learners' condition, and the environment conducive

to learning are just a few of the many concerns that must be addressed. These are some of the many factors to be considered, not to mention the internet connectivity, budget, and learning modality. A strategy must be developed as a product of engagement among education stakeholders in the Philippines, (Joaquin et al., 2020).

The Pandemic may have forced education to get out of its comfort zones inside the four walls of the classroom. Still, it also pushed education to revolutionize and reinvent the educational landscape. A peek into the future.

FRAMEWORK

COVID-19 Pandemic challenges schools to respond proactively to its negative impacts, especially the students learning and well-being as the most vulnerable groups in time of pandemic. Though caught unprepared, countries worldwide had extended help to support the needs of the students and their families. Educational policies were developed vis-a-vis social and emotional support was already in place (OECD, 2020).

Substantial gaps remain among groups, but these initiatives cemented the need for a responsive education, especially in a Pandemic. There is also a substantial increase in anxiety and depression, substance use, loneliness, and domestic violence. With schools closed, there is a genuine possibility of an epidemic of child abuse (Galea et al., 2020).

Teachers primarily carry on their shoulders the weight of the sudden shift to the new normal education. Though teachers' sacrifices were recognized and appreciated, inevitably, the traditional face-to-face setup was no longer the trend in times of Pandemic. There is a need for an updated approach to education. Youth no longer wants to be mere receiver of information; instead, they are open to new approaches in education. The youth wants to collaborate, teaching to be personalized, and have an active involvement in the teaching and learning process. In order to respond to these needs, teachers need to catch up and develop 21st-century teaching skills and improve their ICT literacy (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2020).

To address the barriers of distance learning, Azzahra (2020) mentioned the need for a learning modality that is diversified, a proactive response among local government units, teacher trainings, and capacity development, and an intensified partnership among stakeholders of education to make education responsive even in time of COVID-19 Pandemic.

Students, especially the most vulnerable groups, worsened by economic gaps and differences were the most affected. The level of experienced difficulty determines the amount of coping strategies. de Ridder and Kerssens (2003) states that no single personal factor could be identified as relevant in shaping coping behaviors. However, the combined impact of individual factors explained a considerable amount of variance at the individual level.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

There is a wide array of literature about the learning difficulties and coping mechanisms of students. The COVID -19 pandemic challenges the readiness and flexibility of both students and teachers about the new set up of education called new normal. There were efforts in the past measuring the effectiveness of distance learning, but the urgency of the issue became serious since educational institutions do not have any option but to resort to distance education like never before in history. Each strives to still deliver education amidst lockdowns, health protocols, the threat of infections, and the existence of different variants of the virus. Thus resulting to the extension of lockdowns and serious health measures to lessen and contain further disease among people. The research investigated the (1) profile of the Education Students of Aurora State College of Technology in terms of age, sex, and area of specialization; (2) the learning difficulties experienced by the respondents in the shift to flexible learning modality. This is described in terms of the content, performance tasks, and summative tests. Lastly, (3) coping mechanisms of the respondents in the shift to flexible learning modality amidst COVID-19 Pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A descriptive method of research was utilized in this study. It describes the profile of the population involved, the learning styles and the coping mechanisms developed by the respondents as the college shifted to flexible learning modality. The questionnaire is the primary instrument used to gather data. The study assessed the learning difficulties of Education students and their coping strategies in the shift to flexible learning modality amidst COVID-19. An interview among the respondents was conducted to validate the results of the investigation. In order to analyze and interpret the results, the research utilizes statistical tools appropriate to the nature and scope of the study.

The study may help identify the existing difficulties of students and their coping strategies in the sudden shift to flexible learning modality amidst COIVD-19. The findings of this research can serve as bases to evaluate the existing strategy of educational institutions to ensure that learning can still be effective. This research can lead to the innovation and development of current theories related to distance education and its adaptability in the context of different learning environments.

Participants

The research utilized the Education students of Aurora State College of Technology as participants. The participants are enrolled in the three Teacher Education programs offered by the institution. These courses are the Bachelor of Secondary Education (major in Filipino, English, Mathematics, Science), Bachelor of Elementary Education and, Bachelor of Technology and Livelihood Education (major in Home Economics and Information and Communications Technology). The study involved 165 participants who rated the learning difficulties and coping strategies survey.

In order to determine the sample size of the study, Slovin's Formula was used. From 419 Education students enrolled in Aurora State College of Technology, 165 cases were identified based on a 90% confidence level at a 5% margin of errors. Respondents were randomly selected. Based on the actual data gathering, 165 responded, covering a total of 100% retrieval. For survey research, a response rate of ≥ 80% is expected. The percent of retrieval in this research is 100% and therefore highly acceptable.

Instrumentation

In order to gather data, the researcher used a questionnaire. The survey contains three parts. To describe the respondents' characteristics, the first part of the questionnaire collects information with their profiles. The second part of the survey comprises the learning difficulties experienced by the respondents in terms of content, performance tasks, and summative tests. An assessment of the limitation of the flexible delivery mode was conducted in terms of the scope of the topics covered, the performance tasks required by the teacher per subject, and the difficulty to implement the summative tests as the only assessment tool used to evaluate learning. Through the use of the survey, the coping strategies of the respondents were identified.

In order to establish consistency of responses and the results, the research utilized an unstructured interview to validate the data inputs gathered from the

participants.

The instrument was implemented only upon the validation of the instrument due to pre-testing, approval of the concerned authorities to gather data, and the consent extended by the respondents before they participated in the data gathering.

Data Collection

The questionnaire underwent pre-testing to validate and test the reliability of the instrument. The research instrument was evaluated. The comments and recommendations by the respondents were considered. The population who answered the pre-testing of the questionnaire no longer participated in the actual data gathering.

In order to answer the objectives of the research, the results were tallied, analyzed, and interpreted. The study employs statistical tools to ensure accurate presentation, analysis, and interpretation of data. These include frequency and percentage (to describe the aggregate of the population) and weighted mean (to measure the weight of individual responses and the relationship of a part to a whole).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Data gathered through the questionnaire were analyzed and interpreted. The research adopted a 5-point Likert scale with equivalent meaning and verbal interpretations in the analysis.

Table 1. Descriptive Summary of the Respondent's Profile

Age	F	Percentage
18	11	6.7
19	25	15.2
20	44	26.7
21	50	30.3
22	31	18.8
23	3	18.8
24	1	0.6
N = 165		

Age	F	Percentage
Sex		
Male	24	14.5
Female	141	85.5
N = 165		
Major		
English	7	4.2
Mathematics	29	17.6
Science	12	7.3
Filipino	63	38.2
Home Economics	6	3.6
Information and Communications Technology	3	1.8
BEED	45	27.3
N = 165		
General Weighted Average		
80-82	1	0.6
83-85	11	6.7
86-88	44	26.7
89-91	80	48.5
92-94	22	13.3
95-97	7	4.2
N = 165		

Results revealed that a significant number of the respondents aged between 19-21 years old, the majority were female (85.5%) taking all the major courses in the program, namely, English (4.2%), Mathematics (17.6%), Science (7.3%), Filipino (38.2%), Home Economics (3.6%), ICT (1.8%) and Elementary Education (27.3%). The general weighted average ranges between 89-91, respectively.

Table 2. Descriptive summary of responses in terms of the Content

Statements	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation
1. The content covers a limited number of topics.	2.8	Moderately Difficult
2. Limited opportunity to deepen the lesson.	3.0	Moderately Difficult
3. A limited number of examples to understand the topic.	3.0	Moderately Difficult
4. Limited to no access to reading materials and references.	2.7	Moderately Difficult
5. Relying solely on what has been given by the teacher.	3.0	Moderately Difficult
6. Limited opportunity to interact and learn from peers.	3.2	Moderately Difficult
7. Preferred learning styles of students are no longer applicable.	3.0	Moderately Difficult
Average Weighted Mean	3.0	Moderately Difficult

Regarding the learning difficulties experienced, statistical computations revealed that respondents find the Content moderately difficult (AWM=3.0). Though caught unprepared for distance learning under the flexible learning modality, respondents could adjust in time. The overall experience of the students using the Blended Learning approach was relatively positive (Malonzo et al., 2021). Further, students also mentioned some negative factors. For those who are not disciplined with their time, the requirements could pile up as the pressure of a deadline is not present.

The result validated the level of difficulty experienced by the respondents. The cost of the internet is rather expensive, interaction and collaborative thinking are hard in an online platform, the cost of accessing the internet is relatively expensive, especially if they have to download materials which would take up a lot from their load balance, as for doing collaborative work, chatting sometimes is not effective. At the same time, video conferencing is also hard for some due to poor connectivity and expenses for a load. Other disadvantages cited by the students are: (a) they are easily distracted in social media, (b) it is hard to follow some guidelines, and (c) not everyone owns a laptop or other devices (Ali et al., 2020; Malonzo et al., 2021).

The institution also responded proactively through different initiatives. Based on the CHED Memo No. 4, series of 2020 Part IV, no. 1, which states the importance of a learner-centered approach that is deeply rooted in the needs

of the students. Those educational institutions shall provide learners with the most flexibility in learning content, schedules, access, and innovative assessment, using digital and non-digital tools. These initiatives mitigated the impacts of the sudden shift in the flexible learning modality leading to moderate difficulty.

Table 3. Descriptive summary of responses in terms of Performance Tasks

Statements	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation
1. Multiple intelligences of students are rarely developed.	3.0	Moderately Difficult
2. Effective teacher approaches and strategies are no longer utilized in the delivery of the lessons.	2.7	Moderately Difficult
3. Individual differences were no longer emphasize.	2.8	Moderately Difficult
4. Learning process is vague and sometimes not available.	2.7	Moderately Difficult
5. The practice of cooperative learning as part of the learning process, cooperative learning is no longer available.	2.8	Moderately Difficult
6. Teaching and learning process is not consistent.	2.7	Moderately Difficult
7. The utilization of the nature of the learner (advance, average, slow) as an integral part of the learning process is not available.	2.8	Moderately Difficult
Average Weighted Mean	2.8	Moderately Difficult

Regarding the learning difficulties experienced, statistical computations revealed that respondents find the performance tasks as moderately difficult (AWM=2.8). Students experienced moderate difficulty on performance tasks related to the development of multiple intelligences (WM=3.0), teacher's approaches and strategies (WM=2.7), individual differences (WM=2.8), learning process (WM=2.7), cooperative learning (WM=2.8), consistency of the teaching and learning process (WM=2.7) and the utilization of the nature of the learner as an integral part of the learning process (WM=2.8). The shift to flexible learning modality has taken its toll on teaching and learning pedagogies.

Before the COVID-19 Pandemic, educational processes, teaching pedagogies, and competency standards are appropriate to the traditional educational setup where students attend face-to-face classes. The interaction is physical and visible to both teachers and students. The sudden shift to flexible learning modality as the immediate response of educational institutions to continue instructional

delivery amidst lockdowns and community quarantines resulted in difficulties. Despite the limitations, all stakeholders try to maintain the quality and standards of teaching and learning in the so-called new normal in education. With all their attached problems, virtual classes significantly developed stresses and raised concerns about students' academic performance (Ali et al., 2020).

Table 4. Descriptive summary of responses in terms of Summative Tests

Statements	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation
1. There is a limited number of summative tests.	2.8	Moderately Difficult
2. Summative tests are limited to multiple-choice types, essays, narratives, and research projects.	3.1	Moderately Difficult
3. Different assessment tools and techniques are no longer available.	2.8	Moderately Difficult
4. Assessment strategies hardly cover the three domains of learning (cognitive, affective, summative).	3.0	Moderately Difficult
5. Too many learning activities resulted in mere compliance.	3.2	Moderately Difficult
6. There is a limited to no mastery of the essential learning competencies.	2.6	
7. Learning has been limited to answering modules, and student performance is measured through mere cognition and compliance to assigned tasks.	3.1	Moderately Difficult
Average Weighted Mean	2.9	Moderately Difficult

Table 4 shows the learning difficulties related to summative tests. Based on the findings, the respondents experienced moderate difficulty (AWM=2.9) in the summative tests in the shift to flexible learning modality. The respondents experienced moderate difficulty in the following areas: the number of summative tests (WM=2.8), purely objective type questions, assessment tools and techniques as reflected in the syllabi (WM=2.8), covering the three domains of learning (WM=3.0), the number of learning activities (WM=3.2), the mastery of the essential learning competencies (WM=2.6), the level of understanding gained in answering modules, and evaluation of student performance (WM=3.1). Though these difficulties emerged, the impact was reduced to moderate effect due to the immediate response of governments and academicians to explore learning modalities appropriate to the learner's condition. With the growing pressure of

teaching and learning in the new normal, Talampas and Martinez (2021) found out that teachers exerted efforts in redesigning their strategies that are responsive to the conditions of their students. As distance learning became a popular modality in the time of Pandemic, they also modified their activities relevant to the demands of the teaching modality adopted.

During the Pandemic, there were changes made in the assessment. These changes included modifying assignments and assessments, flexibility in assignment deadlines, shifting to pass/fail, and modifying assessment reporting deadlines. Less often made changes included accepting of alternative projects, modifying the assessment reporting process, modifying course evaluations, shifting to credit/no credit, and changes to assessment roles and responsibilities (Jankowski, 2020). There is a significant reduction in the impact of the Pandemic on learning difficulties among students. Equity and inclusion among the vulnerable groups result from the initiatives of governments and countries all over the globe, with support from agencies and educational institutions (OECD, 2020).

Table 5. Descriptive summary of Coping Strategies of Education Students in the Shift to Flexible Learning Modality

Statements	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation
1. Developing an inner sense of motivation and focus.	3.3	I usually do this a medium amount.
2. Developing a new learning style and study habits.	3.5	I usually do this a lot.
3. Making use of time management principles properly.	3.4	I usually do this a medium amount.
4. There is online consultations and opening up to Class Advisers, Subject Teachers, and Directors regarding learning difficulties.	3.0	I usually do this a medium amount.
5. Asking for peer support in accomplishing a learning task.	3.1	I usually do this a medium amount.
6. Opening up to family members about the situation and suggesting how each can help.	3.0	I usually do this a medium amount.
7. Learning new skills that are useful in synchronous and asynchronous learning.	3.4	I usually do this a medium amount.
8. Utilization of technology, the internet, and other learning software applications and platforms that can aid in flexible learning modality.	3.5	I usually do this a lot.

Statements	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation
9. Developing a reading habit using online resources, e-library, and archives.	3.3	I usually do this a medium amount.
10. Committing myself to discipline, commitment, and purpose in the teaching profession.	3.7	I usually do this a lot.
Average Weighted Mean	3.3	I usually do this a medium amount.

Table 5 shows the gathered data on the coping strategies of the respondents. Statistical computations revealed that respondents do cope with a medium amount (AWM=3.3). Students cope-up through the following: develop a sense of motivation and focus (WM=3.3), make use of time management (WM=3.4), do online consultations about learning difficulties (WM=3.0), ask for peer support (WM=3.1) opening up to family members about learning difficulties (WM=3.0), learning new skills (WM=3.4), developing reading habit using online resources (WM=3.3). The most utilized coping strategies of the respondents are about developing new learning styles and habits (WM=3.5), utilization of technology that can aid learning (WM=3.5), and committing oneself to discipline, commitment, and purpose (WM=3.7).

The shift to the new normal education and the adoption of flexible learning modality among educational institutions brought by the Pandemic has also led to the coping strategies of the respondents. These coping strategies led the respondents to learn new skills and habits apart from traditional educational setup, routines, and learning styles. Both teachers and students and all stakeholders of education realized the importance of utilizing technology that aids learning. Most importantly, the degree of commitment of the respondents to discipline, dedication, and purpose that no matter what set up the educational institutions will have, students can always find a way and cope with the demands and pressures of the new normal.

CONCLUSIONS

As educational institutions shifted to flexible learning modality, findings revealed that Education students experienced learning difficulties at a moderate level in areas related to the content, performance tasks, and summative tests. The proactive responses of educational institutions, parents, teachers, and all

stakeholders of education reduced the expected impact of COVID-19 in the education sector. Distance education has been in placed decades-long, but the COVID-19 Pandemic made educational planners and stakeholders realize its importance. As the affected vulnerable groups struggle to cope up, responses and interventions are reduced if not mitigated its expected impacts.

The respondents experienced moderate learning difficulty, and they coped up with a medium amount. In conclusion, from among the coping strategies identified, the most valuable coping strategies amidst the ensuing Pandemic are the following: developing new learning styles and habits; utilization of technology that can aid learning; and committing oneself to discipline, commitment, and purpose.

TRANSLATIONAL RESEARCH

With the findings of this research, the development of learning theories and principles for the improvement of the existing teaching and learning pedagogies is possible. This will also ensure that teaching pedagogies are appropriate to the current trends and changes in the new normal. This will aid policymakers as they revolutionize education. Delivery modalities adopted can be evaluated using the findings of this research and can be used as a basis in the planning and intervention. All these will positively respond to the needs and demands of the times, making education relevant and responsive despite the ensuing COVID-19 pandemic.

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