



Investigating the shift of blended learning: Insights from public university students experiences

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Abstract

Blended learning is one of the recent global issues in the “new normal” curriculum setting, especially in Higher Education Institutions. This paper explored the blended learning instruction modality of the public university in which the verbalization of student-respondents was captured. Thus, this phenomenological study uncovered the students’ lived experiences on switching blended learning instruction employing in-depth focus group discussion with 15 students in the different programs. The phenomenological inquiry emerged eight essential themes that were associated with each other: online learning practices, the advantage of blended learning, challenges in blended (poor learning environment and personal barrier, infrastructure factor, and academic barrier), and the proposed recommendation: establishing infrastructure, nurturing synchronous and asynchronous teaching-learning, and implementing the curriculum. Verbal statements, reflections, and expressions of the participants were transcribed from emic to etic and analyzed through smooth analysis. The study revealed that related factors that influence the challenges of the students during the implementation of blended learning were identified characterized by poor learning environment and personal barriers, infrastructure factors, and academic barriers. Thus, public universities may focus on addressing these challenges by adopting the concept of the designed continual process generated in this study known as the Daling Blended Learning Process Model (DBLPM).

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Introduction

Blended learning is one of the more contemporary pedagogical strategies that address the issues brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach blends traditional classroom instruction with internet learning. According to Dziuban *et al.* (2018), who released the findings of the annual survey of higher education, blended learning was highlighted as one of the significant challenges for both teaching and learning in the global context. Consequently, Hinampas *et al.* (2020) and Wang (2018) claim that a blended learning approach ensures that students continue their studies and improve their practical skills by allowing each learner to choose their own learning style. It has been demonstrated that this teaching-learning approach significantly affects students' academic progress. Thus, it aimed of this study was to explore the lived experiences of students in a public university in engaging in blended learning.

Many authors cited the issues, findings, or points of view on the crucial role and impact of blended learning to students. According to Rasheed *et al.* (2020), students' key problems include self-regulation barriers and challenges using learning tools. Teachers' use of technology in the classroom presents the most challenges. Tayebinik and Puteh (2012) found that blended learning may be viewed as an effective method of distance learning in terms of students' learning experiences, student and student interaction, and student and faculty interaction, and it may eventually become the main educational model. Based on Kung-Teck *et al.* (2020), there were positive impacts on both learner autonomy and students' motivational factors, but there was no significant difference between students' academic achievements in blended learning and conventional learning. They indicated that if there was sufficient financial, material, and technical support, blended learning may be employed in secondary school.

The aforementioned authors show how, while being the option chosen to address the existing state of education, blended learning caused challenges for

both students and professionals. One of the state institutions and colleges in the Philippines that was impacted by the sudden school lockdowns brought on by the pandemic was Surigao del Sur State University (SDSSU)-San Miguel Campus, which used a blended learning strategy. However, because the bulk of the students' living areas had poor or no internet connectivity, implementing the teaching-learning technique was challenging.

The self-paced learning module was created and presented to the students by the faculty.

Additionally, the faculty used emails, group video calls, Group Chat (GC), and synchronous and asynchronous learning modalities to communicate with students and reinforce their learning. As a result, the author opted for this study to examine blended learning in university. This study is distinct from the ones that have been listed since it will look at how students experienced the blended learning strategy. In their initial attempt, Compe *et al.* (2021), examined the issue of faculty competency and its impact on students participating in blended learning. Hence, the author opted for this study as the second attempt to examine the blended learning instruction modality of the public university in which the verbalization of student-respondents was captured.

The aforementioned background of this study and its significance contributed in developing blended learning approach or any similar that has a relation to the implementation of blended learning curriculum which inspire the researcher to feel an urgent interest and desire to conduct this study as it is timely to consider in one of the research agenda results amidst global pandemic in educational. Hence, this study provided insights into the lived experiences of students in a public university in switching to blended learning instruction. Also, it identified challenges faced by students and proposed recommendations for addressing them.

It aimed to create a phenomenological design that expose the themes from the verbalizations of the

participants as they engage in switching blended learning. Thus, this paper introduced the Daling Blended Learning Process Model (DBLPM) as a continual process for addressing the challenges of blended learning. The study aimed the following objectives:

1. To capture verbal statement on the students' lived experiences in switching blended learning instruction;
2. To provide thematic analysis on that captured verbal statement of the respondents; and
3. To present a designed model that could address the implementation of blended learning approaches.

Materials and methods

This study employed qualitative research in which phenomenological design was applied. According to Acosta and Acosta (2017), phenomenological design identifies the essence of human experiences about the phenomenon described by the participants. Furthermore, this study was conducted to 15 student-participants of 4 programs of Surigao del Sur State University-San Miguel Campus. Hence, Focus Group Discussion (FGD) method was conducted to substantiate the objectives of the study. Pitogo and Ecle (2021) highlights that a focus group is a method where organizer assembles a representative of the group of respondents and facilitates a discussion in response to preset prompts. Data were transcribed and thematically examined after recorded confidentially.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical underpinning of this inquiry is Carman's Blend Learning Theories (2005). Live events, online information, collaboration, evaluation, and reference materials—the five main tenets of this theory—appear as essential elements of a blended learning process. Live events have an emphasis on synchronous teaching-learning, with faculty guiding lessons in which all students are actively participating at once. Online content refers to training and learning activities that the learner completes independently, at his own pace, and whenever it suits him, including interactive learning. Collaboration refers to situations

where students engage in social interaction with others, such as through email, threaded discussions, and online chat. Assessment is to determine the level of student understanding. Reference materials that increase learning retention and transfer, like downloadable instructional materials.

The underpinned theory supported by Kolb's theory of learning styles. Kolb's concept of learning styles is based on the fundamental premise that knowledge is created by transforming experience. Learning happens automatically as a learner engages in the activity or activities necessary to learn well. Experience takes place as a process that transforms or modifies a person's abilities, maybe also changing how teachers and students adapt the blended learning strategy. The constructivism hypothesis, which maintains that learning happens as a result of discovery and ongoing reflection, so supports the notion. When starting a task, a person will first face a variety of difficulties, but with time, they will discover how many factors affect how successfully they carry out their duties (Cherry, 2020; Kurt, 2020; Oni, 2013).

Results and discussion

Capturing the lived experiences of the student-participants of Surigao del Sur State University-San Miguel Campus amidst of COVID-19 pandemic, the author generated phenomenological design that uncovers the eight revealing themes that verify in finding the experiences of the students during the blended learning approach.

As shown in Fig. 1 represents the Daling Blended Learning Process Model (DBLM) a continual process in implementing blended learning approach. As presented in stacked venn, the smallest circle represents the core of the curriculum and the approach which is the students. The third circle colored with yellow represents the advantages of blended learning to the students which can be acquired through online learning practices, represented by second white circle. Hence, students were struggling in facing the

blending learning approach and these were characterized by the 3 colored gray circles. The thickness of gray color's texture represents the number of thematic codes and greatly impacted the students during the blended learning paradigm. As such, light gray represents that both poor learning environment, and personal barriers have same number thematic code; followed by darker gray as the infrastructure factor; lastly, the darkest gray

represents the academic barriers that evidently have a large thematic codes. Thus, in order to address the continual process of blended learning approach, the 3 proposed themes captivated from the responses of the participants were created and presented by 3 circles with cyclical arrows; establishing infrastructure, nurturing synchronous and asynchronous learning, and implementing curriculum .

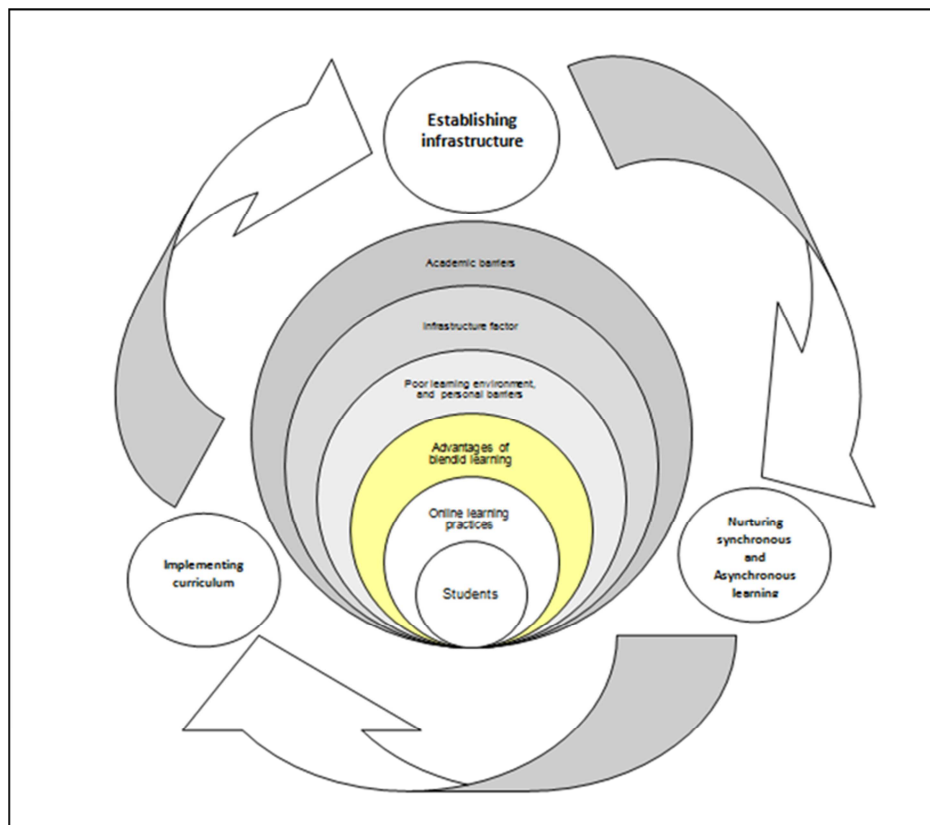


Fig. 1. Daling blended learning process model (DBLPM)

Theme 1: Practices in online learning

The use of Facebook messenger Group Chat (GC) was the only means of faculty and students' communication and interactions during lockdowns. The use of virtual class is done synchronously and asynchronously in the facebook messenger with the integration of google meet as the only means of virtual classroom. Regardless of the internet connectivity, the over workload cause by different tasks and activities, and demands of different courses requires them to balance the time and find other means. With this, it was observe that during the blended learning students were able to

inculcate the value of managing time and resourcefulness. This is evident in these statements:

“Although, we had poor internet connection but still we were able to comply all the requirements because we work it on time; other students made the poor connectivity an excuse just to escape the lessons.” (R11)

“I have no stable access to internet connection but I can find ways through connecting it to coin wi-fi in complying my requirements, doing the research, and joining the online classes.”(R2)

Hence, most of the students in the university were residence of within the local, phone signals and internet issues are not uncommon concerns, but to bridge the gap and to embrace the new normal, students were able to establish time management and resourcefulness. These values adhere and reflected in the objectives, outcomes, and competency of the every courses or programs. This affirms to the statement of Lassoued *et al.* (2020) that in response to the calling for a modern education system, it requires technology integration and creates flexibility in the learning environment, to achieve educational security and improve university outcomes.

Theme 2: Positive impact of blended learning

The sudden exist of the COVID-19 made the economy challenge to shift its paradigm to a new normal. Hence, the implementation of blended learning among Higher Education Institutions (HEI) is a strategic approach to bridge the gap between the delivery of curriculum and school lockdowns. Students were in their respective homes while faculties were in the university, some were working from home. As such, students use self-pace learning module in which all the instructions, details, and activities of the courses were reflected. In addition, the use of Facebook Group Chat (messenger) for both faculty and students interactions, communications, and updates made the institution adheres to continue the delivery of curriculum to the students. Thus, blended learning proved that it has a positive impact to learners, such as, it develops independent learning. Confirmatory statements related to this are verbalized by these respondents:

"In blended learning, it made us force to understand independently the lessons." (R6)

"Blended learning become useful in the future because it will help and prepare us to be independent in our real life." (R8)

"Blended learning is advantageous because while we are in pandemic, it still helps to continue our education." (R3)

In addition, using technology proved that it has a crucial role in 21st century skills curriculum. In 21st century, students would be highly technology skilled. Thus, the blended learning positively provides students an opportunity and motivation to learn and develop technology skills. This fact proved by following respondents' statements:

"There are some advantages happened while we are in blended learning, like it develops our technological skills example typing skills and develop authors' ideas." (R11)

"Through our experiences in blended learning, we were encourage and adapt to utilize technology tools in innovating teaching strategy as an effective future teacher." (R1)

"Blended learning becomes useful for us in the future, especially in our field, because it helps us to enhance our knowledge in utilizing tools for presentations." (R5)

Hence, engaging students to activity with the use of online activities can improve academic performance as he/she learned independently. Furthermore, the application of synchronous and asynchronous teaching-learning with the integration of online tools can develop high impact learning outcomes in which students may generate or develop his in-depth ideas and knowledge through discovering online informations, principles, and theories. The verbalization of the respondents affirmed to these:

"Internet is a source of more explanation, deeper knowledge and ideas to choose." (R10)

"Internet is a big help because whatever the lackings in the module we could able to find more ideas and explanations on the website or google." (R14)

These narratives affirms that the approach of blended learning through the integration of technology have a positive impacts to the students of university as it address to new normal curriculum. These positive impacts are characterized base from the narrative evidences of

the respondents; it develops independent learning, provides opportunity and motivation to learn and develop 21st century skills, and generates or develops or discovers in-depth ideas and knowledge from online informations, principles, and theories. This finding conforms to the statement of Magomedov *et al.* (2020) that integration of new technology into education does not mean that it will improve interaction between teacher and students but it provides more possibilities for both teacher and student.

Theme 3: The challenges in blended learning

The Department of Health's report on 4,195 confirmed cases (DOH, 2020) has a significant influence on state universities and colleges. The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) banned online instruction after three days of the national memorandum for alternate delivery due to an increase in the number of students and faculty who clamoured the online mode of learning for different reasons. The fact is that majority of Philippine higher education institutions were not yet prepared to deploy this online platform (Toquero, 2020).

The challenges experiences by students during the blended learning approach are qualitative evidence through articulations and verbalizations of the respondents. In this phenomenological inquiry revealed four themes related to the challenges experienced of students in blended learning which are crucial, namely: infrastructure factor, poor learning environment, personal barrier, and academic barriers.

Infrastructure factor

Availability of internet connectivity is one of the essentials in establishing infrastructure in the university even when the new normal was not yet exist. But, the existing pandemic made the students more realize the importance of internet in aiming the competencies of every course. This is confirms from the respondent's statements:

"Internet is not stable internet access especially in remote area." (R8)

"Internet is not stable even when you open Learning Management System (LMS) and join the virtual classes in Google meet." (R2)

Poor learning environment

The learning environment is essential to the learner. The technology apps are the only means of virtual classrooms between students and faculty in realizing the lessons. Hence, home's activities distract the students in focusing the lessons and course activities, such as running errands, or neighbors' activities, in which it is uncontrollable. This is confirms to statement of the respondent:

"The challenge I encountered during this blended learning instruction is being distracted by so many things at home, which I cannot concentrate and focus in answering my modules." (R8)

"Blended learning is difficult for me because we used to have face-to-face learning which we were comfortable to understand the instructions, compared to blended learning that self-learning is needed." (R12)

Personal barrier

Students and faculty have experienced shock and tension as a result of the emergency switch to distance learning, both personally and professionally. This is because the transition requires additional work and presents a number of unique challenges for colleges and universities, including a lack of resources, a lack of infrastructure, and insufficient digital content (Lassoued *et al.*, 2020; Khalaf, 2020). Hence, students found struggles to adjust the demand and stand of the faculty that affect their mental and emotional health. This is confirms to the statement of one of the respondents:

"As a student, our request to the teachers that they may have more patience to handle their students because we are also in the adjustment stage and we are all new to these types of learning." (R5)

Thus, the verbalized respondents' statements affirm the major challenges they encountered in blended learning instructions. From the verbal responses of

the respondents, they can be thematically divided into three categories: the infrastructure factor, which is characterized by a lack of internet connectivity; the poor learning environment, which is characterized by unavoidable environmental distractions; and the personal barrier, which is characterized by mental and emotional well-being.

Academic barriers

Engaging students in active learning even in online activities had been proven by many authors as cited by Esquiredo-Pitogo and Ecle (2021) such as Wang *et al.* (2019), Alrashidi *et al.* (2016), and Wong and Chong (2018). Students' involvement in activities can help them to improve their academic performance (Wang *et al.*, 2019; Alrashidi *et al.*, 2016). Through online engagement, it promotes collaborative active learning, enriches learning activities that exposes them to different educational experiences, and promote communication between faculty and learners (Wong and Chong, 2018). Hence, this online learning is part of the blended learning approach.

However, because of the limitations of technology, many students claimed that online classes and academic engagement were more difficult than the used classroom settings. Hence, Muthuprasad *et al.* (2021) highlighted that while students are in remote learning they must be focused on academic engagement or any related activities to improve their learning experiences. As the online teaching-learning approaches integrated, it was evident that academic barriers were observed as the major contributing factors that were associated with the challenges in students' blended learning.

Though there were advantages in switching to blended learning students found struggles in understanding the context of technology in education. This might be the sense of being responsible for integrating technology into education. This is evident in the verbal statement of the respondent:

"Blended learning is an advantage because it helps the students to expose to technology; however, we

have to consider also its other contexts to education".(R15)

The major approach of the university in switching the blended learning was the modular approach; this is to address the learners who have no internet accessibility. Teaching-learning, especially the faculty instructions for the activities were done in the module. However, students were found to have difficulty understanding lessons and instructions. This is due to struggling in interpreting or following the instructions or texts found in the learning module. Confirmation of these statements is verbalized by these respondents:

"In my experience, instructions in the module were not specific and some were hard to understand". (R14)

"It is better to have a teachers' discussion, because we can get different ideas. So, it is really difficult for me to learn while we are in blended learning instruction". (R13)

"Blended learning is really difficult for me because I hardly found to understand the lesson, unless the teacher will discuss and explain to me". (R11)

On the other hand, switching to blended learning instruction was a challenge for the university in transforming and preparing the curriculum's instructions. One of these is the designing and the perusal of teaching-learning module. The process of ensuring the quality of its content takes time. In result, facilitating the distribution of the availability of these instructional materials was delayed. Students were bombarded with the heavy workload of the module's activities and timeline, and hard to manage the time. This finding is verbalized by the respondents' statements:

"The time flexibility and delayed modules' distribution made us not to prioritize the learning module". (R6)

"Instructional materials were delivered late and faculty wanted to submit it in a short given time". (R12)

“Blended learning is hard for me because modules were delivered late and many activities they have given to us without clear instructions”. (R9)

During accomplishing the learning module, students utilized internet as their references in understanding the instructions and lesson demonstrations through referring terms or vocabulary to Google or internet, and YouTube video presentations and demonstrations. Regardless of the strength of the internet, students mostly hook to the sites or websites’ content that could divert from the interested lessons or topics. This finding affirms to the verbalized statement of the respondents:

“Internet is very helpful but sometimes it made me out from my focus because of the destructions of websites content”. (R7)

Thus, the confirmatory verbalized statements of the respondents highlight the major contributing factors in academic barriers. These verbal statements are thematically characterized as the struggles in understanding the context of technology to education, difficulty in understanding the lessons and following text instructions, heavy workload and its conflict in managing time, and the destruction of website in self-paced learning.

Theme 4: Proposed recommendations

Based from the captured verbal challenges in blended learning approach, it is evident that establishing infrastructure is one of the factors in considering and implementing blended learning approach. Hence, strengthening internet connectivity may be a need to consider for the local government with the collaboration of the Communication Company or organization. Confirmatory statement related to this is verbalized by one of the respondents:

“For me, the solution of all the challenges that we encountered in this blended learning is to establish stable internet connectivity like what other countries done, or maybe government or any other concern agency to look into these challenges so that the university will produce quality education.”(R13)

Furthermore, when infrastructure and its internet connectivity are established, the academe institution may be able to nurture synchronous and asynchronous teaching-learning approach. In relation to this, the internet connectivity may help the public university to motivate the faculty in innovating a blended learning strategy. This fact is evident in the statement of one of the respondents:

“My recommendation regarding the challenges in terms of internet connectivity is that, teachers may have a video or record the discussions related to the topic, like what some instructors did, so that those students who don’t have stable internet connection can able to understand and cope up the subject activities.” (R4)

Moreover, implementing blended learning approach in higher education is a great challenge, particularly in implementing the curriculum in the applied science courses. Since, applied science courses require lectures (principles and theories), and laboratory (application), such as medical, agriculture, and others. In relation, the bannered programs in Surigao del Sur State University-San Miguel Campus designed a practical application of science in agriculture and forestry in which lessons of principles and theories may be understood through actual application or performance. These competencies may be done through shifting to new normal design to consider the performance-based courses. Confirmatory statement of this fact is verbalized by the respondent:

“We would like to request to have a face to face in our laboratory subject even only in higher level ; 3rd year level and the graduating students. We will just follow the health protocols.” (R12)

The verbalized respondents’ statements affirm the possible recommendations or solutions in implementing blended learning approach as a new normal curriculum in pandemic. They are thematically characterized from the verbal statement of the respondents: establishing infrastructure that can be done through strengthening internet connectivity; nurturing synchronous and

asynchronous teaching-learning that is innovating blended learning strategies; and implementing curriculum that performance-based courses may considered.

Lastly, the verbalized respondents' statements are affirmed by the authors; Teo *et al.* (2020), Blankey *et al.* (2019), and Sia and Adamu (2020). According to Teo *et al.* (2020) HEIs need to equip and upgrade their technology infrastructure for learning. They added that the effectiveness of e-learning can be boosted by establishing proficient e-learning infrastructure as well as making continuous standardization efforts. Blankey *et al.* (2019) proved that the use of online technological tools enhances the student learning experience. This is a transformation that has a positive impact on the education sector and requires a closer understanding to utilize it efficiently. Sia and Adamu (2020) affirmed COVID-19 also provides an opportunity to HEIs to reconstruct the education system and establish updated programmes and assessments.

Translational research

This study provides perspective of the implementation of blended learning instruction as one of the mechanisms in new normal panorama that have high massive impact to educational system. Being one of the few researchers on COVID-19 pandemic, the lived experiences of the students in blended learning instruction, a phenomenology, leaves some answered questions and open doors to readers and future researchers for in-depth discovery on blended learning instruction or any related COVID-19 pandemic study or articles, such as the experiences of the faculty, challenges of the higher education institutions amidst COVID-19 pandemic, and assessment or evaluation to the effectiveness of blended learning instructions or distance learning or any teaching-learning approaches implemented during the pandemic that can address the issues and dilemmas that can strengthen higher education's curriculum reform agenda. Thus, the qualitative result of this study would be productive not only to

the higher education institutions of the Philippines but to the global education context as well.

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