Sink or Float: Experiencing Distance Learning Education through the Lens of College Students

Vivian Grace L. Kitongan[1] ID
Joselito C. Gutierrez[2] ID

[1,2]*Saint Louis University, Baguio City, Philippines.*
[1]*Email:* vglkitongan@slu.edu.ph *Tel: +639194357427*
[2]*Email:* jcgutierrez@slu.edu.ph *Tel: +639297414158*

(✉ *Corresponding Author*)

Abstract

At the onset of pandemic, schools offer online classes for those who have access to internet and correspondence-based learning (CBL) for those who have difficulties accessing internet signal. Hence, this study delved into the learning experiences of college students who subscribed to the CBL modality. Using phenomenology design, findings showed the difficulties and good experiences encountered in the CBL platform. Difficulties referred as sinkers are learning environment difficulty, scaffolding shortage and mental struggles. Good experiences referred as floaters are family bond support, mentor support, and dependent support. After two years of having this distance learning format, students still experience difficulties that pull them from achieving quality education. However, there are still good things out of these experiences which push them achieve their educational goals. This study hopes to contribute in advancing curriculum design, planning, and implementation of distance learning education, particularly those using solely modules in the Philippine education setting.

Contents

Contribution of this paper to the literature
This paper contributes in advancing the delivery of correspondence-based learning (CBL) since most of the schools are offering either online or CBL learning modalities. The insights gained in this research can be a good source in improving the curriculum design, planning, and implementation in this time of changing learning delivery.

1. Introduction

1.1. Distance Learning Education

From a historical perspective, distance education started with the invention of the printing press. After that, the postal service followed, which created a more systematic, planned approach to open, flexible, and distance education to develop (Anderson & Simpson, 2012). From there, education authorities made considerable innovations in distance education. During this period, schools offered distance education in various formats for various educational purposes. It had become common household words during the pandemic when all schools closed and started online and distance learning. This unprecedented change disrupted college students' life experiences in all facets of their college life (Fruehwirth, Biswas, & Perreira, 2021). Online and distance learning became increasingly common, and it became a hashtag "new normal" mode of study throughout the world. The Philippines is not exempt. In 2019, the coronavirus disease (COVID -19) crisis wedged into the whole social aspect of this country, including the education sector. The pandemic closed all schools at all levels. UNESCO, in its press release dated April 29, 2020, claimed that there are still 1.3 billion students affected due to schools being closed (UNESCO, 2020). But DepEd Secretary Leonor Briones said that education must resume because education cannot wait (De Guzman, 2021). The Department recourse to use distance learning modalities involving technology and internet connection for learning continuity. This way, students can continue their education in remote setups through online/offline platforms, TV, and printed modules. They can access these tools in various ways, such as blended learning and homeschooling. In blended learning, any of these modalities are being used alternately to maximize benefits and achieve high-quality education as the Department hopes so. In homeschooling, students learn with their parent/caregiver as their teacher (Child Hope Phils, 2022).

As a response to this move, the Commission on Higher Education (2020) ordered universities to adopt distance learning education and prepare format designs applicable to their learners. Transformation in instruction delivery and learning spaces were positioned leading to relocating to what is now a new normal in education. There are three (3) flexible learning systems that students can choose from - online, offline, and blended. An online classroom for instruction delivery and management of academic programs is utilized online, alternating synchronous and asynchronous methods (Usher & Barak, 2020). The synchronous mode of learning comprises virtual interactions between the teacher and the students and student to student, while the asynchronous transpires without schedule restriction for all the learners (Singh & Thurman, 2019). Off-line modality or Modular Distance Learning (MDL) uses printed modules or digital media in storage devices. CDs, DVDs, USB storage, and computer-based applications can all be used to deliver e-learning materials, including offline e-books. Anyone from the family and community can be a para-teacher in this modality (Llego, 2020). Thirdly, blended combines online and offline modes plus TV/radio-based instruction. The unique feature of distance learning is that it serves as a conduit for continuing education outside school, regardless of geography. It is flexible due to its varied course structure by which students can take courses fitting to their schedule and preferred location (viewsonic.com). In the Philippines, approximately 2, 400 colleges and universities adopted modified forms of online learning to deliver learning activities to their students. Online learning might be synchronous, real-time lectures and time-based outcomes assessments or asynchronous, delayed-time activities, like pre-recorded video lectures and time-independent reviews (Oztok, Zingaro, Brett, & Hewitt, 2013). However, private HEIs are left to make policies without implementing rules and regulations. Unfortunately, these are not sufficient for the educational needs and severely affect students' learning quality. These responses are still rigged and full of loopholes (Joaquin, Biana, & Dacela, 2020). Learning experiences become limited, and students are shortchanged.

1.2. Students' Learning Experiences

Learning experiences are any experience, whether planned or unplanned, in any number of settings and contexts that transforms learner insights, supports emotional growth, and builds knowledge, skills, and dispositions (LaRocco & Fanelli, 2021). In other words, learning experiences are what bring development and skills acquisition to a learner. Specifically, the learning experience is the interaction, program, course, or any other experience in which learning happens. Essentially, the learning experience highlights the purpose of education rather than how or where it is delivered. A good learning experience focuses on being authentic, interactive, and collaborative to enhance engagement and improve knowledge retention. Besides, it adds value to the learner, encourages social learning, promotes learner self-assessment, and is inquiry-based (Anthony, n.d). It is common knowledge that students acquire much of their knowledge base in school.

In the usual setting, students learn, retain, and apply information most effectively when they have received personalized education paths and when sufficient resources are available (Brooks, 2021). Brooks (2021) justified further that typically, in a classroom, students that need more attention or support are tended to, immediate feedback is provided, and lots of opportunities for student-instructor and student-student interactions. However, global disruption caused by Coronavirus disease forced the education sector to shift to the distance learning method. Thus, making the traditional teaching and learning methods no longer an option. Consequently, even learning experiences shifted.

Several studies focused on students' experiences during this new normal learning system. Their findings unanimously showed that there are difficulties students experience in this learning landscape (Barrot, Llenares, & Del Rosario, 2021; Baticulon et al., 2021; Cleofas, 2021; Cleofas & Rocha, 2021; Rotas & Cahapay, 2020). Common difficulties from their findings range from lack of gadgets such as laptops or tablets, unstable connectivity, power interruptions, scarcity of learning resources, vague learning content, overloaded learning content, restricted teacher assistance, poor peer communication, financial problems, problematic learning environment, conflict with home

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responsibilities, physical health compromises and mental health struggles, frustrations, psychological distress and anxiety (Cleofas & Rocha, 2021; Rotas & Cahapay, 2020). Barrot et al. (2021) added unconducive home learning or the lack of it and poor or limited technological literacy and competency. Baticulon et al. (2021) categorized these into five, namely, technical, individual, domestic, institutional, and community barriers.

Similarly, these findings are echoed in the large-scale study conducted by Yan et al. (2021) in all K-12 schools in China's Guangdong province. One unique conclusion they mentioned that is not visible in the others is student disengagement. They explained that a lack of visual and instructor presence could reduce students' attention, recall of information, and satisfaction in online learning. Selvanathan, Hussin, and Azazi (2020) also pointed out that these difficulties are also real for disabled students. They are considered vulnerable; whose ordeals are higher to a certain extent. They are also the population that suffers disparity and drops out the most. Another study by Brown, Hughes, Keppell, Hard, and Smith (2015) uncovered a contributing factor to poor retention, progression, and completion. Their analysis reveals a significant disengagement risk period for first-time distance learners towards the latter part of their first semester, just before the final assignment was due. There was a period when even the highly motivated students began to question their ability to complete their program. This feeling is familiar to passive students, who had lost morale, procrastinated, and allowed their progress to stagnate following disappointment in earlier assignments. Secondly, a barrier to completing the program is the lone wolf experience. This experience is about the ill-informed assumption that distance learning is to be approached as literally as that – by distance and devoid of interaction. These learning experiences are compelling drives to disengage and discontinue the program, which students in an offline or modular mode more highly experience. With these number of studies that gave us the narratives of the challenges learners experienced in the sudden shift to the new learning platform, we can say that there are many things to address for its improvement and more effective responses to implement.

1.3. Research Gap

Despite efforts to make education accessible for all, many difficulties are still confronting Filipino university students in the practice of distance education. These studies significantly reported reflections, lessons learned, and suggestions on navigating education in this time of uncertainty. Also, most of the studies reported on students' experiences enrolled in online and hybrid. Those students who opted for modular modality were not highlighted. The goal in mind is to help authorities develop better responses to education. If this inquiry is addressed, lessons can be drawn and may eventually open windows for relevant actions.

As a result, this study aimed to reveal learning experiences by college students under modular learning mode in the wake of the COVID 19 crisis. Specifically, it sought answers to the following questions, to with:
1) How do you view distance learning?
2) What are your challenging experiences in your distance learning education?
3) What about your most inspiring experiences during distance learning education?

1.4. Significance of the Study

As the widespread use of distance learning is here to stay awhile, and perhaps with some additional impetus from experiences with the unabetted COVID-19 pandemic, the implications of this study will contribute to the enhancement of learning experiences that teachers extend to their students. Dayaan (2021) in his article, said that in this period of hit and miss, as the Philippines ventures into a new mode of learning, there are lots of factors that our education system is not prepared for. Major concerns are the policies and guidelines, innovative educational framework, teacher capacity, learner readiness, and efficiency of the new learning environment. The best way to move forward is to step back and design strategies and learning innovations grounded on a deeper understanding of distance education through reliable sources (Commission on Higher Education, 2020). What could be the best reliable source if not the product of research? Also, as mentioned earlier, there were no clear guidelines set by CHED concerning implementing distance learning. This study would help craft policies and procedures for the performance of distance learning strategies, especially in modular-based education.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This study utilized the qualitative method and phenomenology as a research design. Creswell (2013) noted that qualitative research is typically used in investigating an area of interest where not much has been known about a phenomenon. The primary purpose is to reduce one's lived experiences into a description of the universal essence (Creswell, Hanson, Clark, & Morales, 2007). As this study adapted the descriptive approach, Gummesson (1991) explained that descriptive research describes the fundamental characteristics of a phenomenon at a given period. Thus, this design is suited to this study as it purports to characterize the difficulties and dynamics of distance learning for university students during the COVID-19 period.

2.2. Study Participants

This study involved second-year students currently enrolled at Saint Louis University. To draw meaningful "meat" to the inquiry, these students are already in their 2nd year of experiencing the same learning modality they have substantive exposure to. Also, they are the ones who have just graduated from senior high school with a face-to-face learning modality and came to college with a sudden change of learning setup. They will be, no doubt, in the position to provide the needed information sought in this study. Although Patton (2002) said, "there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry, and sample size depends on what you want to know; the purpose of the inquiry; what is at stake; what will be useful; what will have credibility; and what can be done with available time and resources," this study aimed for the maximum number of phenomenology subjects who are utilizing the modular/courier based learning (CBL) modality. Out of 36 CBL students currently enrolled in the FIT OA course for the academic year second semester 2021-2022 Batch 2, only nine (9) responded to the emailed letter. These nine (9) subjects replied to follow-up emailed messages to clarify their responses. All the rest that could not provide clarifications of their answers or did not respond for follow-ups were excluded. They are composed of 7 females and

2 males whose age ranges from 20-to 21. All the respondents were informed of the study's intent and were assured of their anonymity and privacy.

2.3. Data Collection Procedure

To gather data, letters of the request were sent to the target subjects through email to seek for their consent to participate in this study. Subjects were assured of their anonymity and confidentiality and had the right to withdraw anytime during the interview. The researcher assured further that their participation would not affect their grade. A summary of the interview questions was sent to them. After getting the subject's consent, they were asked to choose how the interview be conducted from email correspondence, chat, mobile phone call, or zoom. All nine (9) participants chose email correspondence. Each of the subjects was assigned a number as a pseudonym. An aide memoir was prepared that served as a guide and probed responses significant to the inquiry. Specifically, critical questions asked include 1) How would you describe distance learning? 2) What were your most challenging experiences during your almost two years of distance learning? 3) What are your inspiring experiences during this learning period?

2.4. Data Analysis Procedure

The data gathered were read, reread, and analyzed. Word, phrases, and sentences were compiled with the thoughts that go together. A repertory grid was used to draw clusters of themes. Warm and cold analyses were applied to condense the meaning of the phenomenon being investigated (De Guzman & Tan, 2007). As part of the checking procedure and validation, the data, categories, and interpretations were again presented to the participants (De Guzman & Tan, 2007).

2.5. Ethical Considerations

The participants consented to the study and were ensured of the confidentiality of any information they relayed.

3. Findings and Discussions

Extracted through warm and cool analyses are two interesting themes that students of the CBL modality experienced. From their shared day-to-day routine of going through their academic obligations, they came up with 2-poles of experiences: 1) their sinkers and 2) their floaters.

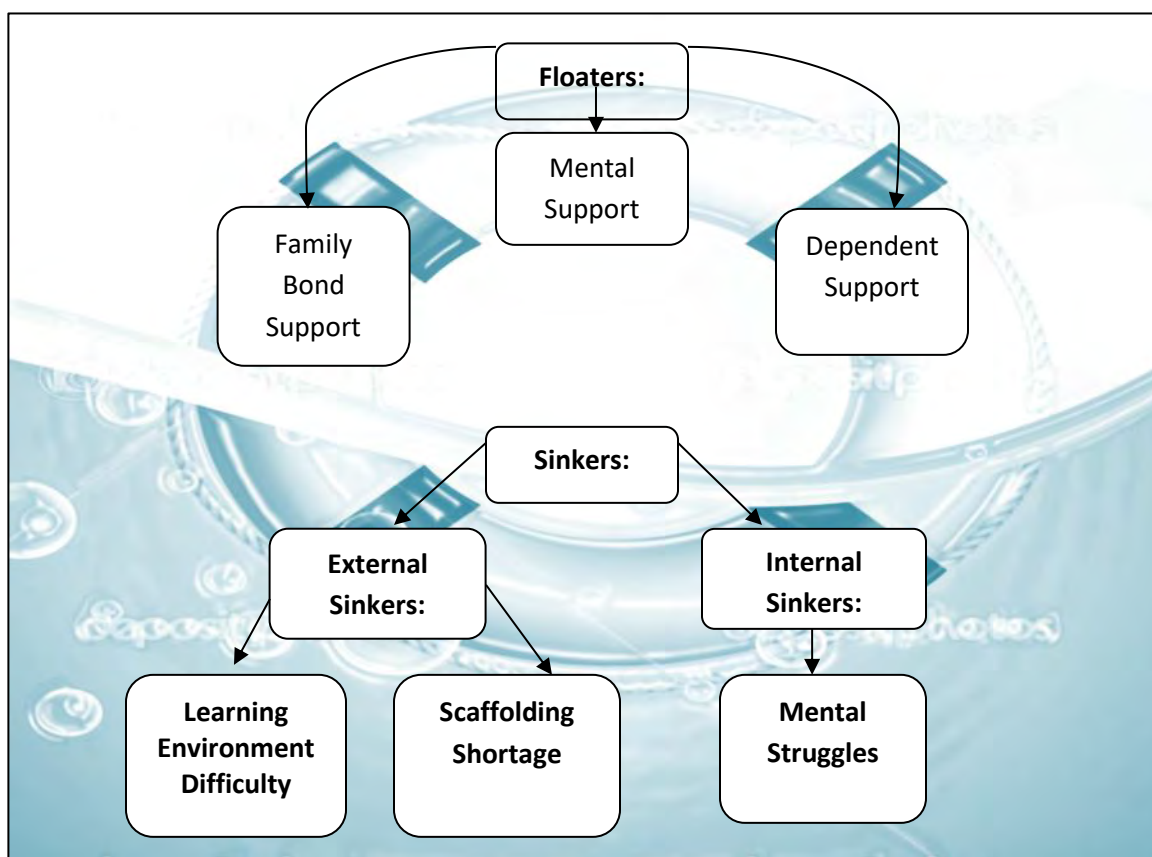The study fostered a simulacrum that represents the students' academic life in this learning setup.

Figure 1. Illustrates the buoy of CBL experiences showing the floaters and sinkers.

The simulacrum is arranged so that the themes that stemmed from their difficulties and memorable experiences are encapsulated. Their 2-poled experiences are best described as sinkers and floaters. The sinkers are the most common difficulties in their learning experience and are subdivided further into two according to the source – external and internal. External sinkers are about their a) learning environment difficulty, and b) academic scaffolding shortage, whereas internal sinker is their mental struggles. On the other hand, Floaters are their places of relief and the good things that ever happened to them during this time. They named three as the memorable experiences that helped them float: a) family bond support, b) mentor support, and c) dependent support.

3.1. Sinkers: What Weighs us Down

The respondents unanimously agreed that distance learning education (DLE) using the correspondence-based learning (CBL) modality is difficult. The difficulties are categorized into two: External Sinkers and Internal Sinkers.
3.2. External Sinkers

Respondents gave two (2) major causes of their learning difficulties. These are the weights that pull them to hit rock bottom so to speak. Their most significant challenges were brought about by the learning environment difficulty at home and insufficient scaffolding or support for learning.

"I can't focus…so many distractions at home, and household chores" (Girl-1).

"Toxic environment…so much noise" (Girl-2).

"Attending to responsibility as a student and responsibility as the eldest daughter" (Girl-3).

"When we are required to video ourselves for a task, it is not easy to find a spot in our house where there is no noise, and I won't easily get distracted." (Guy-2).

"The most challenging experience is the learning environment…Not every household understands the demands of distance learning. It is also harder to concentrate since the family problems are mixed with academic struggles. There is also no clear separation between when a student is a child and when a child is a student." (Girl-4).

These are the different statements, but the respondents expressed the same tune regarding the difficulty of having a conducive learning environment. One of the male respondents articulated it clearly when he said, "*The most challenging for me is finding a clear distinction between home and school because we are cut off from having a boundary of what is work and school.*" (Guy-1).

The learning environment comprises people, teaching materials, technical tools, learning resources; curriculum, training, instruction; and physical environment/learning space (Balog, 2018). Learning space is highly influential in learners' knowledge and skills acquisition. The learner's ability to retain information, apply solutions to analytical problems, and innovative new ideas are associated with the surrounding where learning takes place, Balog (2018) further claimed. On the contrary, students may perform poorly if the learning space is not hassle-free. Hence, the learning space condition contributes significantly to academic achievement.

It also echoes what Barrot et al. (2021) uncovered, where the learning environment at home was the most significant challenge among students using online learning. The lament of these students about their need for a conducive learning environment is palpable.

The second cause of their challenge is scaffolding shortage. According to the respondents, having only a module to study is not enough to have quality learning.

"I have trouble having in-depth understanding…." (Girl-7).

"Difficulty understanding the lesson and not receiving clear instructions." (Girl-5).

"It feels like I'm not learning because I'm not sure if I learned from the written discussion." (Girl-6).

"It is difficult not having reference resources…" (Guy -2).

"Reference resources are one of the most challenging during distance learning education. Most of the professors do not share other references in the module. There is no way for me to read further about the lesson." (Guy-1).

Scaffolding is used in construction to support workers in doing their work. Scaffolds are temporary supports set up to assist work crews and materials in constructing, maintaining, or repairing structures. Scaffolding in instruction is temporary support teachers provide to their students to accomplish a task or acquire a skill or concept. As the student reaches the learning, the scaffolds are gradually taken down. Scaffolding helps students become independent and self-regulating learners and problem solvers (Joshi, 2018).

In online learning, scaffolding is well provided through the learning management system and varied learning platforms and resources. But the CBL students are deprived of this access. One limitation of CBL students is the lack of or limited internet access, thus, inadequate technological support. That is the main reason they opted for the CBL modality. Consequently, this modality offers restricted scaffolding as well. The shift from the traditional teacher-centered methods to student-centered methods brought a drastic collapse in student readiness. They have to rely solely upon themselves to find supports and references to substantiate their learning. It could also be a chance to develop their learning autonomy. However, they were not prepared for it. There was no gradual process of change, which made others unable to cope and aggravated their learning environment. When asked why not contact their instructors, they said they were unsure if they were allowed to do that. They are shy to attempt as one of the respondents expressed "*wag na…Baka mapahiya Ako…*(I'd rather not, I might be put to shame). There is hesitation to contact their instructors through any communication platforms such as email, mobile number, or messenger whenever they have an internet connection.

A study conducted at the University of California, Merced (Donham, Barron, & Alkhouri, 2022) identified supports and barriers that affected both instructors and students they experienced during the emergency remote teaching. The students who participated in the study determined that 1) Tools and support for class content; 2) Mental/emotional support, and 3) Preexisting support were the most challenging in their learning. This proves that scaffolding comes not only in pedagogical content but also in other aspects, such as the emotional and mental aspects of the students.

Instructional scaffolding is not just a teacher's responsibility to have effective learning. The community where the students live should also be equipped with learning resources. The school does not have the sole responsibility and obligation to provide all the learning needs and resources of the students. The community is also concerned with the welfare of its constituents. Interest includes health care, peace and order, and educational support. An integral part of community welfare is providing a conducive learning environment and academic support.

The external sinkers of these distance learners are learning environment difficulty and scaffolding shortage, which drown them in their achievement of quality education. Sufficient scaffolding contributes to a conducive learning space. These can be achieved when school and community work hand in hand to uphold student welfare.

3.3. Internal Sinkers

Aside from the challenges brought about by external factors, distance learning students suffer from internal factors categorized in one theme, which is Mental Struggles.

According to them, mental struggles make it difficult to cope with the academic requirements. Stress, overwhelmed feeling due to too many requirements, loss of focus, poor retention, poor understanding, pressure from overload lessons/activities, and a sense of dread are identified by the respondents as their causes of mental struggles. Although stress is a result or consequence, they explained that knowledge alone that there are requirements and

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readings to do, even without opening the modules, triggers on-set of mental stress. Too many requirements from different subjects/courses give an overwhelming feeling, especially on the days approaching the end of the semester. Respondent Guy 2 explained that "*due to lack of effective time management, many multiple requirements to submit on the same day makes me jittery, and I feel flooded.*" The respondent was asked why he rushed the requirements when it's near the final submission for further clarification. He said, "*the requirements are difficult and time-consuming.*" Another respondent said that she struggled "*finding the motivation to get started on the course work…internal distractions and technical issues distract me*" (Girl 4). Self-motivation is not sufficient for them to do their academic responsibilities. The learning setup is not what they are used to. Girl 2 expressed in her own words, "*It is hard to cope up as we are accustomed to face-to-face.*" There is also the feeling of dread if what they are doing is right, what they understand is correct, or if what they are showing is on point in their video demonstration. Immediate feedback from instructors is not easily obtained. The need for confirmation even from their classmates is also difficult to gain. Most of them do not know each other. They don't even know who their classmates are. Feedback is also a form of scaffolding, but the lack of it gave them this dread.

Özüdoğru (2021) uncovered in his research of college students that the problems of distance learning by the students are inability to communicate with friends, inability to focus, is not accustomed to the system, lack of knowledge, skills, and attitudes, feeling the need to socialize and remaining passive. These problems are not so different from what the participants in this study have mentioned. Similarly, Idris et al. (2021) survey proved that the students experience mental health issues during distance learning. Specifically, mental issues mentioned are stress, anxiety, loneliness, and depression. This affirms that students around the world have similar experiences.

3.4. Floaters: What Pulls us Afloat

It was enlightening to reveal that some of the respondents found good things during this trying time in academia. Confronted with the multitude of home and academic tasks and responsibilities and the downsides of distance learning, the respondents noted good experiences that kept them going. These good things may be just a moment, a gesture, a sound, or a conviction, are strong forces to give them a "push" moving forward toward their educational goal. This "push" serves well in keeping them afloat in the turbid waters of their sinkers.

Family Support. Strengthened family bonds came as the most common experience by most respondents. Compelled to stay at home, minimized mobility, and the fear of being infected by the virus caused the family members to hang out together.

"It strengthened our family bond as we stayed at home most of the time…" (Guy 2).

While others have stressed family relationships and suffered the newly contracted vocabulary "cabin fever syndrome," which describes the feeling of being trapped, or sick of being locked up, many families are enjoying the presence of their members, or they have learned to cope with having each other at home. This could be due to having the situation for two years. As a part of a coping mechanism or resilience, family members were able to get used to the presence of each other. Some research findings substantiate this result. Evans et al. (2020) studied Australian family experiences during Covid-19, and the findings brought out a broad spectrum of responses. Dominating the themes are messages around loss and challenge. However, some families reported positive experiences such as finding new hobbies and developing positive characteristics such as appreciation, gratitude, and tolerance. A similar study conducted by Ongören (2021) examining family relationships showed a positive result. Participants mostly gave upbeat assessments of relationships within the family during the pandemic, stating they were together, supported each other, and established positive communication. Concluding further by the author that this situation shows that individuals preserve the importance of the concept of family and that even if conditions change, they continue to pay attention to relationships within the family (Ongören, 2021).

Mentor Support. Another positive experience for our participants was when some teachers reached out and facilitated. Contrary to the sinker they gave above on difficulty in scaffolding, Girl-3 expressed that the best thing she experienced in this learning arrangement was when some of her mentors reached out through email correspondence. That made her communicate with her instructors more constantly regarding their courses/subjects, asking for clarifications and seeking favors of extending deadlines. One respondent's experience proved that this gesture from a teacher means a lot to a student and counted it as one of the best of their experiences. This gesture is one technique that teachers of distant learning can repeat.

Dependent Support. Thirdly, another respondent expressed that the reason why she keeps going in this educational setup is the realization that her family expects so much from and supports her. "*Maraming umaalalay at umaasa sa yo, wala kang gagawin kundi magpatuloy at magtapos….*(Many are supporting and expecting from you, there's nothing for you to do but to continue and finish/graduate)." The realization dawned on her that somebody depended on her. Setting an example to finish her studies, which is unsurprising since this is a very Filipino culture, motivated her to persevere. Realization and self-conviction are the intrinsic motivation that will keep a person pursuing one's goal. When someone depends on you, you realize that you become responsible for not failing and being a model to that person.

Family, mentors, and self-realization are the forces that keep our students afloat. Some of these good things that they experienced may be menial and brief; to these students, it is blissful. These experiences still contribute significantly to their learning and development amid pandemic woes.

4. Conclusion

Concluding two years of academic pursuit during the pandemic period, distance learning education students using the correspondence-based modality still find it challenging to achieve the desired learning arrangement. Difficulties encountered sink them overwhelmingly. External sinkers such as learning environment difficulty, scaffolding shortage, and internal sinker, which is mental struggles are substantial factors that the implementers and curriculum makers should note in the re-designing and implementation of the distance learning education curriculum.

Equally essential to give attention to are the positive experiences the respondents have pointed out. These floaters can serve as a basis to evaluate the effectiveness of different teaching approaches and distance learning

delivery. Distance learning always has problems; however, the difficulties mentioned in this study are covid-19 pandemic related. The respondents' experiences are limited and may not be accurate to others depending on other factors such as location, pandemic mitigation, preparation, and implementation. But findings revealed a need to act and design measures to prevent these problems from being duplicated by the following incoming distance learning students. As universities upgrade and continue to update their operations and services, the lessons learned and documented during this pandemic period could provide a path for improvement in learning experiences, whether in distance learning or face-to-face.

There are limitations of this study that suggests further research. The study focused on distance learning education students using a correspondence-based learning modality. The number of respondents is not enough to generalize, and they are just from one university. Researchers may widen the respondents and include the parents, community, mentors, and other stakeholders in students' learning from different universities.

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