Flexible learning as a new designed pedagogy: The nursing students' lived experiences

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A B S T R A C T

The compelled shift of pedagogy design in nursing education as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought some disparities and challenges in the program, more specifically to the students. The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of nursing students with flexible learning. Using a qualitative phenomenological research design, a one-on-one interview via zoom has been utilized to understand the perception and views of six nursing students who qualified in the inclusion criteria set by the researchers. Specifically, it gives light on their views of flexible learning, the challenges they encountered, and their adaptation methods. The findings show that participants experienced difficulties and made huge adjustments in their routines and approaches to learning. The absence of clinical exposure and the gap in skills and related learning experience in nursing education is their most concerning aspect. However, even with all the gaps and limitations of flexible learning, it also offers unique advantages to them. Participants cited flexibility, self-paced learning, self-discipline, time management, convenience, and time for the family were their positive experiences. The result draws four thematic insights from the experiences of the participants: Sudden Shift of Learning Design is a Tough Change, Gap in the Practical Component of Nursing Education, Flexible Learning is Taking Shape, and Staying Positive with Creative Outlets. The study recommends that nursing institutions and organizations should look into the limitation of resources among nursing students and come up with programs and strategies that would address the gap of skills and practical components in nursing education. Acknowledgment of these limitations should make the nursing schools and administrators come up with some alternatives in the delivery of education as the students adjust to the new learning design.

INTRODUCTION

Nursing education is a method of education that consists of theoretical and skill teaching. It requires knowledge, skills, and judgment based on sociological, psychological, biological, and other allied sciences including medical and nursing sciences. It centers on humanism, the importance of presence, physical proximity, classroom as the real thing, immediacy of feedback, and knowing and learning by human connections, communication, and interaction (Gruendemann, 2011). As such, face-to-face learning is a backbone and is considered a solid practice in nursing education. Moreover, research studies have indicated that quality in education can be attained by face-to-face interaction (Miliszewska, 2007; Kristiansen, Burner & Johnsen, 2019).

However, the SARS-CoV-2, which is the identified etiological agent of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), has become a public health emergency internationally and globally. This does not only bring enormous economic consequences but also an overwhelming impact on global education. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2020), there are one 1.3 billion students around the globe who missed to join school or university in March of 2020. Specifically, in the health field, nursing schools are invigorating for inimitable challenges. Nursing academic programs made the tough decision to cancel the clinical exposure and practicum of the students, issues on the adequacy of the development of all skills needed to complete the course, the use of information and communication technologies in the related learning experience, the in-person clinical placements needed to satisfy the requirements of the degree, and matters about continuing in the rest of the program (Dewart et al., 2021).

As a result, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) issued *CHED Memo No. 04, series of 2020* on the operation of flexible learning and teaching alternatives, methods, schemes, systems, pedagogies, and modalities in the higher education environment. According to the Commission, flexible learning is the approach wherein learning delivery will take into consideration the learners' unique needs in terms of place, pace, process, and products of learning. It contains the use of digital and non-digital technology or a combination of modes of delivery. Though flexible learning is considered promising to change conventional nursing instruction, there are many trepidations concerning the learning experience of nursing students, mainly on the extent of guidance and feedback that can be given to them. In response to the gap presented, the study aimed to explore the lived experiences of nursing students with flexible learning. It is anticipated that this study can contribute to the growing body of knowledge on the impacts of COVID-19 on education sectors, especially to the nursing students.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study aimed to explore the nursing students' lived experience with flexible learning. Specifically, it aimed to give answers to the following questions:
1. What are the views of nursing students on flexible learning?
2. What challenges the nursing students have encountered?
3. What are the nursing students' adaptation methods?

METHODS

Research Design

The research design that was used is a qualitative, phenomenological approach to answer the goal of the study which is to explore the lived experiences of nursing students undergoing flexible learning. A qualitative research design seeks to understand the meaning of data that helps analyze the experiences of the identified population. Phenomenology allows the research to explore the meanings that people associate with the actions and behavior of their life experiences of a concept or phenomenon (Dela Fuente, 2021; Mohajan, 2018). In this research design, an interview guide was made. An interview guide is an instrument that contains a set of questions to serve as a guide for the interviewer in collecting information from the participants (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). The order that was followed in the inquiry was predetermined as well as the opportunity for the interviewer to explore particular

themes or responses. Specifically, the reconstruction of lived experiences of nursing students was obtained through an in-depth interview via zoom. An in-depth interview is an intensive and concentrated interview composed of the open-ended and discovery-approach method to obtain detailed information about a topic. It is best suited in this study because it explores participants' points of view, experiences, feelings, and perspectives. Thus, the contents of their lived experiences served as the primary data of this research endeavor.

Participants of the Study
The participants of the study were six nursing students who qualified in the inclusion criteria set by the researchers. Specifically, (a) currently enrolled in either public or private nursing school, (b) undergoing flexible learning, (c) experienced face-to-face class in the past; (d) resident of Negros Occidental.

Research Instrument
The researchers designed an interview guide as a data collection instrument for this study. The nursing students who are undergoing flexible learning were interviewed. The interview questions aimed at eliciting relevant information concerning their lived experiences. Questions relating to their views and perceptions challenges encountered and adaptation methods with the new learning design were asked during the interview, like their thoughts of the flexible learning, how were their studies been affected or changed, and how they managed the stress and challenges of flexible learning.

Data Gathering Procedure
The researchers sent a letter via email and obtained full consent from the participants before the conduct of the study. The participants were purposively and thoroughly selected by the researchers. The data gathering approach of this study was a formal interview with the participants themselves via zoom. During the conduct of the interview itself, a good rapport was ensured between the researchers and the participants by explaining the purpose and scope of the study, their rights of confidentiality, and refusal at any time. Participants were encouraged to converse freely and share stories using their language. The discussions on the participants were according to their availability and convenience. The data saturation level was identified by the researchers in a process carried out in parallel with data collection. In addition, the documentation process was in a form of video and audio recording in zoom. The researchers secured the interview recordings through password encryptions in the digital space of the drive. It is only the researchers that had access to it. The researchers then checked for the completeness of the data that was gathered, made a transcription, analysis, and returned to the participants for the validation of the themes that emerged, and reporting of the concepts and themes.

Ethical Considerations
Considering the research design of this study which is qualitative, the interaction between the researchers and participants can be ethically challenging. Therefore, the formulation of specific ethical guidelines in this respect is very essential. First and foremost, the researchers sent a letter via email to the participants of the study, including the purpose of the study, the risks, benefits, and alternatives with an extended opportunity to ask questions. Full consent was then secured. The anonymity of individuals who participated was ensured. Participants' names were changed to pseudonyms. Moreover, removal of identifier components such as residence and schools enrolled were observed. The confidentiality of the data was also ensured. The researchers secured the personal information and data of the participants through password encryptions in the digital space of the drive and it will be deleted after two years.

Data Analysis
In achieving the objective of the study, which is to explore the lived experience of nursing students with flexible learning, six participants were engaged in the study. The researchers opted to use Colaizzi's seven-step of data analysis. First, the transcript was read and re-read until an overall sense of the whole content was obtained. Second, in every transcript, the significant statements that relate to the topic being studied were highlighted and noted on a different sheet indicating its page and line numbers. Third, interpretations of significant statements and translations of data from native language to English were done from these significant statements. Fourth, the formulated

interpretations were arranged into groups and clusters of themes. Fifth, the results of the study were combined into a thorough description of the phenomenon under study. Sixth, the fundamental structure of the phenomenon was described. Lastly, the researchers returned to the participants for further information. Reliability and validation of the finding were done by giving the transcribed manuscript, emergent themes, and its interwoven relationships to the participants to compare with their experiences.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the analysis and interpretation of the data collected during the online interview via zoom with the participants on their experiences with flexible learning. The experiences of these nursing students are presented through themes as they emerged from the transcribed manuscript during the interviews. Important statements in the actual words used by the participants are presented to provide the depth and richness of the description of their insights, meaning, and inspirations that they have gained from their experiences.

Theme 1: Sudden Shift of Learning Design is a Tough Change

The fright brought by the COVID-19 pandemic has hugely affected educational institutions. Schools, teachers, students have found themselves unprepared to adapt to the sudden and unplanned transformation in the educational sphere. Specifically, in nursing education, there were struggles on how to continue the clinical and community exposures and how to design the skills demonstrations of these future nurses when all are now based on distance learning. Students, who are used to the didactics of traditional classes and face-to-face learning, have found themselves compelled to deal with new learning design overnight. Change is inevitable, however, the ones that are unexpected and out of our control like, the sudden shift of mode of learning are often the hardest changes. Participants of the study cited the difficulties they experienced with the abrupt change of learning delivery-challenges on technology, the adjustment in routines, issues on self-motivation and time management, and limited feedback and interaction. All of these aside from finding themselves in a context of expectation and uncertainty. As expressed by Ely, "I was a bit overwhelmed because online learning is new to us. My study habit has been changed since I am at home and many factors can affect my learning. I do household chores and sometimes, I am tempted to procrastinate, since I am in my comfort place." Moreover, it was revealed in the study of Rotas and Cahapay (2020), that students from developing countries voiced lots of difficulties with the migration to remote learning modalities.

Table 1. Significant statements on thematic insight
(Sudden shift of learning design is a tough change)

Theme	Sub-Themes	Significant Statements on Thematic Insight: Sudden Shift of Learning Design is a Tough Change
(1) Sudden Shift of Learning Design is a Tough Change	(1a) Challenges on Technology	Felix, male, 29 years old (Significant Statement 1) "Good internet connection, a good-performing device that could store files, and the data allowance greatly matter. If you don't have those, you will be lost."
		Ellen, female, 20 years old (SS2) "Really, it's the technical difficulties that caused the problem. I am staying in a town where the internet connection is not that stable. A little rain, wind, and bad weather you lose your connection.

		That is my number one problem."
	(1b) Adjustments in Routines	Ely, male, 20 years old (SS3) "So far challenges are brownout, sometimes connectivity is slow, sometimes no internet at all."
		Dista, female, 20 years old (SS4) "Specific problems I have faced are technical issues, a stable internet connection is really a must."
		Blenda, female, 20 years old (SS5) "It is very difficult. It needs a huge adjustment. I can focus more in school than here in our house."
		Leni, female, 21 years old (SS6) "I find it hard to adjust from my daily class routine before and the set up now. I was used with face-to-face class then all of a sudden, we shifted to flexible learning. I had a hard time adjusting."
	(1c) Issues on Self-Motivation and Time Management	Ely, male, 20 years old (SS7) "I was a bit overwhelmed because online learning is new to us. The study habit has been changed since I am at home and there are many factors that can affect my learning. I do household chores and sometimes, I am tempted to procrastinate, since I am in my comfort place."
		Leni, female, 21 years old (SS8) "Flexible learning is hard and very challenging. Although it gives us, students, the freedom to choose where, how and when we are going to learn and answer our lessons. Still it's a challenge how to motivate myself and manage my time."
	(1d) Limitation of Feedback and Interaction	Ellen, female, 20 years old (SS9) "It's really hard to adjust from what we were used to, the face-to-face class, wherein you can just easily approach your Clinical Instructors for concepts that you are confused."

Theme 2: Gap in the Practical Component of Nursing Education

The new learning design is delivered through synchronous and asynchronous methods. The synchronous method allows for "live" contact and communication between the students and the instructors, while the asynchronous method involves significant delays in time between instruction and its receipt (Khalil et al., 2020). It has long been acknowledged as an efficient tool for learning. However, the competence of nursing students is based not only on knowledge but on clinical skills imparted to them as well. It is a combination of both the theory and practical learning involvements that allow these nursing students to attain the needed skills, knowledge, and attitudes for providing nursing care. A huge share of nursing education occurs in clinical environments. Clinical practicums are viewed as essential to the curriculum in nursing. The practical component in nursing education is the most emotional aspect for the participants. The limitation of the new learning design pointed out where the absence of actual skills demonstration and the absence of clinical exposures. As stated by Ellen, "The virtual simulation is really helpful. We are learning because of it. But I am disappointed also because supposedly we are now on hospital duty and we can experience it and enhance our skills as nursing students. Now our skills cannot be developed fully because it is all done virtually. It is more on theory and simulation". While the links between contents and assessments are gained, participants' feedbacks suggest that, as a whole, practice-related components could not be learned fully.

Table 2. Significant statements on thematic insight:
(Gap in the practical component of nursing education)

Theme	Categories	Significant Statements on Thematic Insight: Gap in the Practical Component of Nursing Education
(2) Gap in the Practical Component of Nursing Education	(2a) Absence of Actual Skills Demonstration	Felix, male, 29 years old (SS10) "I know Clinical Instructors are having hard times preparing our lessons and adapting as well to this new learning delivery. There is learning but virtual is not enough for us grip all the topics of our subjects, especially the major ones. We are having hard time applying the lessons or performing the procedures we must learn because it must be actual or must be performed in front of our Clinical Instructors."
		Leni, female, 21 years old (SS11) "I learn fast if I see and experience things on actual. Now, I really have to read and study and practice the concept and skill twice or thrice or more for me to understand it. Yes, eventually I learn but it would really be different if it is done face-to-face."
		Dista, female, 20 years old (SS12) "I am not really convinced using online learning with regards to RLE because I don't have a Clinical Instructor to make me stay with my task or explain my task. I also experience technical issues while performing my skill/task. I find it more convenient if there is a Clinical Instructor to guide me and to perform my procedures in a group than performing it alone in the house."

	(2b) Absence of Clinical Exposure	Ellen, female, 20 years old (SS13) "The virtual simulation is really helpful. We are learning because of it. But I am disappointed also because supposedly we are now on hospital duty and we are able to experience it and enhance our skills as nursing students. Now our skills cannot be developed fully because it is all done virtually. It is more on theory and simulation."

Theme 3: Flexible Learning is Taking Shape

Transitioning from in-person classroom and campus and clinical experiences to distance and virtual ones, the situation can feel difficult to navigate for nursing students. There can be some mounting pains and troubles they are feeling and experiencing as they adjust. Though the new mode of learning delivery made a huge change in the educational system and learning experience for nursing students it also offers unique advantages to them. The participants of the study revealed that the opportunity to learn at your own pace, style, and time, extra time with family, minimal financial resources needed, and convenience and flexibility were their positive experiences with the new learning design. This means that a flexible study schedule can still make it possible to achieve their nursing career dreams. As mentioned by Dista, "education right into my home. Convenience and possibly it can be an advantage in the future." Education has come a long way. The idea that the classroom is the only place to learn everything is not that robust anymore. There are some obvious advantages that the new learning systems can give. Despite the shortfalls in technology, this alternative way of learning has become promising for learners.

Table 3. Significant statements on thematic insight
(Flexible learning is taking shape)

Theme	Categories	Significant Statements on Thematic Insight: Flexible Learning is Taking Shape
(3) Flexible Learning is Taking Shape	(3a) Opportunity To Learn At Your Own Pace, Style and Time	Blenda, female, 20 years old (SS14) "This new normal, new method of learning really helped me grow as an individual, as a student. I learned to be more focus and set my own time and pace to study and understand our lessons." Ellen, female, 20 years old (SS15) "I developed self-discipline. I can work at my own pace. I can choose my learning style as to how and what environment I want and plan how I can learn effectively."
	(3b) Extra Time With Family	Felix, male, 29 years old (SS16) "…, I was able to spend more time with my family especially during the lockdown period. I was able to have more time with my mother who has a disability due to cerebrovascular

		accident.
	(3c)Minimal Financial Resources Required	Ely, male, 20 years old (SS17) "… I get some more time with family at home, we see each other and we talk a lot since I am at home than face to face in school. I can interact more with my siblings and parents,
		Felix, male, 29 years old (SS18) "I was able to save money from my fare and lunch every day. That is where I get the money to buy cell phone load and to attend to my online classes."
	(3d) Convenience and Flexibility	Leni, female, 21 years old (SS19) "…I think despite the struggles of the abrupt change of learning method, it also brought advantages to us. Personally, I discovered that I can be flexible. Classroom or house setting, I learned to adapt."
		Dista, female, 20 years old (SS20) "Education right into my home. Convenience and possibly it can be an advantage in the future."

Theme 4: Staying Positive with Creative Outlets

Anxiety and apprehensions surfaced to some students as an upshot of the sudden shift from the physical classroom to a virtual and distant space. Some students have difficulty coping with their academic rigors and personal challenges. Participants of the study have learned to divert and entertaining themselves to different creative activities and doings that are helping them to handle the negative effects ascending from the current learning design. Coping strategies that were mentioned include visual arts, social engagements, and electronic games. As shared by Felix, "to manage my stress I hang out with my friends. I do workouts at least 2 hours a day. I also jog in early morning at 5 am. And of course, the most important coping strategy is prayer and going to church on Sundays and Wednesday evening."

Table 4. Significant statements on thematic insight
(Staying positive with creative outlets)

Theme	Categories	Significant Statements on Thematic Insight: Staying Positive with Creative Outlets

(4) Staying Positive with Creative Outlets	(4a) Visual Arts	Blenda, female, 20 years old (SS21) "Painting, and writing are my coping strategies. I feel more relaxed when I express my thoughts through these outlets."
	(4b) Social Engagement	Felix, male, 29 years old (SS22) "To manage my stress I hang out with my friends. I do work outs at least 2 hours a day. I also jog early morning at 5am. And of course, the most important coping strategy is prayer and going to church on Sundays and Wednesday evening."
		Leni, female, 21 years old (SS23) "I surround myself with positive people. I also unwind after a very tough day for example after exams. I go to church and hang out with the young people there. I talk to my friends and families about how my day went and ask for advices."
		Ellen, female, 20 years old (SS24) "Online classes can be stressful at times, so I do exercise and spend time with my family, as well as keeping in touch with my friends."
		Dista, female, 20 years old (SS25) "I communicate with my teachers. I make sure to address my problems. Aside from school or academics. I also have my co-curricular activities. I maintain a balance in my life."
	(4c) Electronic Games	Ely, male, 20 years old (SS26) "When I get stressed on my homework and assignments, quizzes, I take a time out and rest and I do not force myself if I cannot do it anymore. I cope by playing video games. Sometimes I go outside and get some fresh air and walk around."

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Nursing students who are used to the didactics of traditional classes and face-to-face learning have found themselves compelled to deal with new learning design overnight. As a result, they experienced some hitches like

limited electronic resources, the adjustment in their routines, self-motivation, and inability to focus on screens, and limited feedback and interaction. Above all these, the hardest is the challenges of technology. Though technology has been a powerful and valuable tool for supporting their education, there is a flip side around the use of technology. Participants of the study cited issues such as bugs, speed, errors, and power outages. Furthermore, the practical component of care in nursing education is the most concerning aspect for the participants. The limitation of the new learning approach that was pointed out was that it is more on developing theoretical knowledge and less on practical skills. As a result, everything that was practice-related could not be learned fully by the nursing students. However, it also offers unique advantages to them. The participants of the study revealed that flexibility, self-paced learning, self-discipline, time management, comfort, and time for the family were their positive experiences with the new learning design. To successfully migrate from the face-to-face class interaction to the distance flexible learning, participants mentioned that various creative activities helped them cope with the negative effects arising from their experience. Coping strategies that were mentioned include painting, writing, singing, hanging out with friends and families, communicating with classmates and teachers, doing exercise, playing video games, and praying to God. In conclusion, the four thematic insights drawn from the experiences of the participants were the following: *Sudden Shift of Learning Design is a Tough Change*, *Gap in the Practical Component of Nursing Education*, *Flexible Learning is Taking Shape*, and *Staying Positive with Creative Outlets*.

The result provides an overview of the experiences of nursing students with flexible learning. It may be considered for the further enhancement of the current educational design. Specifically, To the CHED may use the results of the study as their reference in their adoption and creation of policies, regulations, and standards of the nursing program taking into consideration the new mode of instruction, which is flexible learning. To the Nursing Schools that the results of the study may serve as their guide in designing their curriculum and planning activities and programs that would realize and support the full potential of nursing students and to still be able to maximize their knowledge and skills given the new educational transition from a classroom learning setup to flexible learning. To the Clinical Instructors that the results of the study may give them an idea to strategically prepare and establish specific approaches that will make their work and the students easier to provide a more comprehensive learning experience. To the Nursing Students that the results of the study may aid them in their learning styles and strategies in enhancing their skills and expertise on different nursing lessons and procedures through the new educational method. To the Parents that the results of the study may provide information on how flexible learning works. It may further guide them on how to support their children to be able to adapt to the new norm. To the Future Researchers that the results of the study may give the researchers a better understanding of the lives of nursing students undergoing flexible learning. Furthermore, this may serve as their reference for future studies related to the topic.

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