

EXPERIENCES OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION (HEI) TEACHERS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF FLEXIBLE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT: *This study explored the lived experiences of teachers in the implementation of flexible learning at the Bukidnon State University, Malaybalay City during the school year 2020-2021. The experiences of teachers on the content of flexible learning were disclosed. The qualitative phenomenological research design of Creswell (2014) was used in this study. The researcher's formulated interview guide and motive questions were utilized for the conduct of a semi-structured interview and focus group discussion. The participants of the study were three (3) purposively chosen faculty members of the College of Education specifically in the Bachelor of Elementary Education (BEE) program. From the lived experiences of BukSU-CoE teachers in the content of flexible learning, two (2) major themes emerged. These themes include: challenging learning experiences and enhanced knowledge and expertise in learning content. Under the first emergent theme, there were three sub-themes yielded. These were the following: struggles to formulate instructions, outcomes, and instructional material; coping with the struggles in crafting the recalibrated syllabus and modules; and time constraints. While under the second emergent theme, two sub-themes transpired including the selection of essential topics and scale-up teachers' training.*

Keywords: Higher Education Institution Teachers, Flexible Learning

1 INTRODUCTION

During the present time, the education sector is challenged as it is one of the highly affected by the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the government declared the suspension of classes last March 2020, educational agencies such as the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) quickly responded on how to provide alternatives to continue teaching and learning beyond the face-to-face interaction, to limit the population movement, and to mitigate the spread of the infection. As per the assessment of the researchers, it is uncertain to get back to normal teaching anytime soon [8]. There are still growing COVID-19 infections and teachers especially in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) cannot deliver classes in traditional ways until a vaccine is available. HEIs need to guide teachers as this is a new experience for them. They have to prepare, adapt, rethink and transform to respond to the new normal in education. Thus, it has become an urgent need to explore other innovative learning modalities that will facilitate a shift from traditional to flexible teaching and learning options.

The Philippine Commission on Higher Education (CHED) advised the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to start adopting flexible learning modalities to ensure the safety of the Filipino learners against being infected with the virus [1]. The guidelines on the implementation of flexible learning are stipulated in the CHED Memorandum Order (CMO) No. 4, s. 2020 which adopts and promulgates the guidelines on flexible learning to be implemented by public and private Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Bukidnon State University (BukSU) is one of the HEIs that responded to the national and local government's regulations and the latest advisories of CHED. Furthermore, BukSU teachers shall consider this as the practical approach such as to convert traditional face-to-face syllabuses and lesson plan to a flexible learning one.

Flexible learning, as a learning approach, has already surfaced in the educational institutions even before this COVID-19 has spread and taken on its pandemic extents. Flexible learning is a set of educational philosophies and systems, concerned with providing learners with increased choice, convenience, and personalization to suit the learner [20]. In particular, flexible learning provides learners with

choices about where, when, and how learning occurs. Teachers are involved in combining residential and remote learning modes to address learners' unique needs in terms of pace, place, process, and products of learning. It also promotes learner control and customizability. Thus, this might be the best practical approach during the time of COVID-19.

However, as observed and personally experienced, this is the period of adjustment and a part of the birthing process. Teachers are aware of this pedagogical approach, but they still need to explore its content. Many studies elucidated that varied teaching approaches, methodologies are effective in enhancing learning outcomes [23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30] of specific level of students. However, flexible learning and flexible content is something new to everyone. Flexible content is the skills or knowledge that is the focus of instruction, or the way content is accessed. With the three categories of learners vis-à-vis learning resources identified by the institution needed for flexible learning, teachers are faced to design flexible instructional methods effectively.

Consequently, at this critical moment, HEIs are given academic freedom to shift instantly and to implement flexible learning procedures.

This shift is challenging for anybody especially for teachers who serve as the implementers of this learning approach. The kind of instructional strategies, learning resources, digital tools, and assessment methods to be used for flexible learning are to be considered. For effective teaching, the following are also to be highlighted: delivering the lesson in a clear way, making instruction variety, orientating with learning tasks, engaging students in learning, and providing opportunities for learners' success. In order to find those that are effective, the quality is to be measured. Quality determines how much and how well learners learn and the extent to which their education translates into a range of personal, social, and developmental benefits [10].

This research is a vital step to implement flexible learning effectively even for a short time available and to ensure the continuity of inclusive and accessible education when the use of traditional modes of teaching is not feasible, as in the occurrence of national emergencies. It

focuses on the specific areas of flexible learning especially on its content and it will be treated as a panacea to restructure the learning designs of teachers. In subsequent phases of this work, it is hoped that the provision of additional resources or body of knowledge support teachers of Bukidnon State University and other Higher Education Institutions nationwide in the transition and transformation towards new normal.

2 METHODS

This research was patterned from Creswell's phenomenological research design used by [3] in his study about the abrupt shift to emergency remote teaching of the Philippine higher education institutions in response to the call for continued education despite the global health threat. Essentially, the phenomenological method facilitates a deeper understanding of a certain phenomenon being lived through as described by the participants [7].

This study was conducted at Bukidnon State University. It is one of the Higher Education institutions (HEIs) in the province of Bukidnon and was participated by three purposively chosen faculty members of the Bachelor of Elementary Education (BEE) program. Their ages range from 24 to 36 while the length of their teaching service ranges from 3 years to 12 years. Among the three participants, two of them are pursuing a Doctorate degree, and one of them is pursuing a Master's degree.

The researcher utilized strategies in the data collection, such as the semi-structured interview, focus group discussion, and document review.

a. Semi-structured Interview

The interview guide was formulated to serve as the data gathering tool. The questions underwent content validation by the professor of Central Mindanao University. The validated interview guide questions served as a guide in the conduct of the virtual interview and focus group discussion of the three teachers of Bukidnon State University – College of Education.

b. Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

The researcher conducted the focus group discussion believing that this can capture information about social norms and a variety of opinions or views from the participants. The responses gathered from the activity were substantial as the focus group data emerged from the group dynamic and the diversity of the group. There were three (3) participants who joined the virtual discussion. Also, the researcher and the participants met as a group to discuss the same given topic and motive questions. There was tape-recording of the discussions.

c. Document Review

The researcher conducted a document review in the files of the college of education. The specific documents like the College of Education faculty profile and subjects taught this school year, as well as syllabi, and modules were the source of the baseline data to make the descriptions more comprehensive. The process provided a systematic procedure for identifying, analyzing, and deriving useful information from the existing documents of the faculty during the school year 2020-2021. The research tool was relevant and served as an invaluable part of most schemes of triangulation as essential in the study.

The researcher analyzed the gathered data using a particular method of data analysis [6]. The analysis

consisted of six steps. There were the reading and rereading of the transcribed interviews to get the thought and sense of the whole content shared by the participants. The researcher extracted relevant statements from the transcripts that directly answered the research questions. Then, there was the formulation of meaning on every essential statement of the participants after rereading thoroughly the transcript to ensure the derivation of key statements and accurate meaning.

3 RESULTS

The discussion on discovering the essence of lived experiences of teachers of Bukidnon State University specifically at the College of Education in this section proceeds through the use of matrices containing the significant statements, formulated meanings, meaning units and themes and frames of the extracted statements from the transcripts of the interview to substantiate the claims. This procedure provided the means for determining the lived experiences of teachers in the implementation of flexible learning.

The findings revealed two outstanding themes. Through the significant statements that participants shared during the interview and FGD, *challenging learning experiences* and *enhanced knowledge and expertise in learning content emerged as themes*.

Lived Experiences of Teachers in the Content of Flexible Learning

One of the shared experiences of the participants is their *challenging learning experiences*. This experience pointed to two (3) sub-themes that validate the major theme. These sub-themes include *struggles to formulate instructions, outcomes, and instructional material, coping with the struggles in crafting the recalibrated syllabus and modules, and time constraints*.

Sub-theme 1: Challenging to formulate Instructions, Outcomes, and Instructional Material

The participants had various experiences as to how they struggled to formulate instructions and outcomes for the recalibrated syllabus while in the instructional material was on the making of modules. All these and more are challenges faced by teachers which are being aggravated by the present health crisis.

In particular, one participant shared during the interview that,

“At first and for this process alone, I really found it very hard to select topics which are relevant and important to include in my syllabus. The performance assessment output is also hard. How would I match a particular task assessment to this particular modality to suffice the intended learning outcome/s based on the topics”?

The interview showed that it is a struggle to begin recalibrating the syllabus. The heaviest lift in recalibrating the syllabus was figuring out how to parcel out the course in a way that would give students more flexibility and choice. This is far different from the conventional syllabi that are developed from the perspective of the teacher and designed to present what the teacher plans to include in a course. The recalibrated syllabus is a redesign to devise recalibrated versions of the OBEdized framework of flexible learning. Syllabi vary in format and content and in BukSU, a flexible format was introduced. Course outcomes specify what expectations the teacher has for the course

while learning outcomes shape the expectations in the course.

As mentioned by the participant, the drastic change in education was unexpected. Bukidnon State University never experienced or imposed a suspension of classes for a longer period of time. There was thought that it would only last for a week or two. The participants added:

“This drastic redesigning of syllabus demanded me to ask myself: What content was required? What elements of learning could students control and what flexible and new measures I could use to gauge progress based on my recalibrated syllabus?”

This experience entails that because of the drastic change in education, the recalibrating syllabus was one of the requirements in preparation for the resumption of classes. However, the content of their existing syllabus is for a classroom set-up, yet they are required to formulate a course design based on the practical learning approach implemented by the institution.

The syllabus is considered a permanent record that contains detailed and accurate information about the course requirements and content [14]. Prior to discussing the construction of a learner-centered syllabus, it is important to understand the main purpose of a syllabus as traditionally researched and practiced and the benefits of a learner-centered one [19].

The same as in the making module, the instructional material, and a learning option are identified to manage the instruction provided by teachers. The following was shared by the participants:

“A lot of the content is printed in the module, that’s why it’s very thick. But still, I have to maximize the most important to also maximize learning”.

Flexible learning in the new normal is maximizing learning at home. Compared to the traditional method of using a textbook, teachers have relied so much on this learning resource that when informed to produce a module, they experienced difficulties and even became doubtful if they can fit in the content and the depth of the coverage of materials.

The use of a module presents a more flexible learning environment for both instructors and learners [5]. These need to be successfully designed in order to maximize the chance that learners will experience coherence and progression.

Sub-theme 2: Coping with the Struggles in Crafting Recalibrated Syllabus and Modules

Because of the pandemic, Bukidnon State University has chosen flexible learning, as promulgated by CHED, for students for the foreseeable future. Teachers are still required to go to school and caught in the middle. They were filled with doubts about having to prepare the content, but if they seek guidance and look for appropriate webinars and learning resources to cope up with the struggles they experienced, then they can say that it is a challenging, but fulfilling learning experience during this trying time.

A participant declared in the statement:

“We executed the flexible learning approach by following proper procedure. We started from recalibration, evaluation of recalibrated syllabus, hangtod dayun nga module na dayun ta, unsaun paghemu sa module. I am grateful for the guidance given by the heads and coordinators of IMDC and CITL”.

Teachers use the learning module to create their own learning designs, marking up the lessons and activities they select with the knowledge processes. The sequence of the topics also provides for the continuity link from one level to another. Thus, it is sequenced appropriately and with a range that accommodates learner diversity. But sequencing the structure of a module is an arduous job. With the help of the Instructional Material Development Center (IMDC) and Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning (CITL), the task to select the content of this material lessens the struggles of teachers to start working on this matter.

In the educational context, to sustain and provide quality education despite lockdown and community quarantine, the new normal should be taken into consideration in the planning and implementation of the new normal educational policy [21]. Subsequently, the module seems to be a flexible approach in teaching and learning than the prevailing structured formal school system where they go to school and interact with teachers and co-students face-to-face [22].

Other participants positively expressed some actions they have done to design their modules.

“I was informed about making modules through directives sent to our college. I made it (module) because also of webinars that I have attended to be familiar and be knowledgeable on the content of flexible learning. Specifically, I attended webinars on contextualizing modules.”

“I could not finish in making my modules because I am doubtful if I accurately created the content. Thankfully, I am guided by the textbook written and published by popular Filipino educators”.

The new normal is an opportunity to teach differently to a bigger classroom and in order to learn and adapt, one must cope with the struggles such as in making modules by attending relevant webinars and choosing the right textbooks. A webinar provides flexibility especially now that physical contact is limited to mitigate the spread of the virus. A presentation, lecture, workshop, or seminar is now conducted over the internet. Other teachers are guided by utilizing textbooks in selecting topics for the module. Before, teachers look for a lot of overlap between what to teach in class and the content of the book. But now, they have to choose books to make sure it motivates the material well and explains it clearly through contextualized content.

There is a need for academic teaching staff to exercise thoughtful choices on the valued forms of flexibility in their own local contexts [13]. Besides, Higher Education Institutions’ readiness intends to secure students and teachers, plan for the coherence of instruction to reinforce flexibility through training [15] and prepare to a challenging instruction to continue their discussions and activities considering the unstable and sometimes unavailable internet connectivity among them and the students [16], so modular is the answer.

Sub-theme 3: Time Constraints

Another sub-theme evolved was time constraint in the process of making the module. There are several steps to consider to actually put all ideas into practice. However, it is a challenge to finish a module if time is limited and if every day, teachers perform a number of tasks in different areas of their professional lives.

Participants have their own share of concerns on the ground:

"In the development of the module, it was really hard for me considering the time as well as multitasking. We were doing it while doing another thing or task. It was not the sole task for me to do. We were making modules at the same time conducting the online evaluation. That time also, while we were doing our modules, we were also preparing for AACUP. It's too difficult to manage the time".

"As an instructor, it really hassles me to provide the instruction for one subject for 3 modalities. In effect, I did not have the regular time of explaining the topics. Then, as to the assessment, it was also hard because there are 3 modalities, so we have to execute 3 different assessments for such".

Based on their experiences, it can be gleaned that working in a higher education institution, teachers must expect to have multiple roles. Teachers' role does not only evolve in instruction, but also in other fold functions mandated by the university. So while making modules and executing different assessments for different modalities, teachers must exercise time management. They have to account for time and make more progress if they are flexible to make decisions on which to prioritize first.

Multitasking of teachers in the workplace affected all facets of the teachers' lives, their time management, prioritizing tasks, and multitasking as consequences of this for teachers in the workplace [2]. Therefore, teachers must practice these as skills to cope up with multitasking. This situation demands also a method of assessment that is safe, valid, reliable, acceptable, feasible, and fair [11].

Lived Experiences of Teachers in Enhancing Knowledge and Expertise in Flexible Learning Content

The second emergent theme was the *enhanced knowledge and expertise in learning content*. From the emergent theme, it generated two (2) sub-themes such as the *selection of essential topics* and *scale-up teachers' training*.

In general, topics are enlisted based on the syllabus, thus in terms of its sequence, teachers have an easy time selecting because it was already organized. On scaling up teacher's knowledge and expertise in the content, support from the administration is essential.

Sub-theme 1: Selection of Essential Topics

The sequence of topics covered in the syllabus is one of the core components of a course design and order in which the content is taught. In the face of COVID-19 in the university, the readily available topics based on the traditional syllabus have guided teachers in the organization of content especially in the selection of most essential topics. Thus, the existing topics found in the traditional syllabus become a guide to select the essential topics for the flexible learning syllabus. The participants remarked that,

"The topics were based on the previous syllabus designed for a face-to-face class, but we just selected the most essential based on the OBE. So I think it was made easy for us because we have already the experience in teaching the content-based on the traditional syllabus and we know what the most essential one. Also, the recalibrated syllabus was simplified from the OVPAA".

"The syllabus that we designed was not like the traditional one. That is why the organization of the sequence of topics was easy since it's based on the OBE format that we have already had finished".

The flexible learning curriculum was developed from the same syllabi that are used to develop courses and programs that are offered in the face-to-face mode in the university. From the detailed content of the traditional syllabus that has added topics and discussions if teachers feel needed to serve as supplements to understand lessons further, only the most essential content is to be included since flexible learning is focusing on remote and self-paced learning activities. The previous syllabus was also based on the Outcomes-based Education (OBE) as the curriculum design which the institution continues to adopt. From the detailed content of the previous syllabus, this would now be simplified for students on how to thrive in outcome-based education (OBE) such as the one resulting from the COVID-19 global pandemic. Thus, teachers need to leveraging content that already exists rather than creating new content.

In the OBE paradigm, the instructional and assessment or evaluation practices are explicitly designed for ensuring the attainment of predefined learning outcomes that are aligned to broader, long-term educational objectives [17]. Thus, Flexible Learning should complement outcomes-based education approach which allows flexibility for the HEIs to employ various means of delivery and assessment as long as they can show the achievement of the set learning outcomes for each course/subject for the program.

Sub-theme 2: Scale up Teachers' Training

Even as the Covid-19 pandemic has created hurdles in most teaching-learning activities, there is one aspect where its impact should not be negated — the training of teachers. The participants said that,

"Some of the preparations are conducted or organized by the office of the VPAA like orientations and trainings. They also introduced some of the tools, applications, software. The crafting and recalibrating of syllabus was also the initiative of their office".

"There were also other webinars that were suggested by other teachers and that we have attended. These were organized by CHED and other Higher Education Institutions like University of the Philippines. There were also webinar series conducted by organizations of Filipino teachers who are working abroad. Those were helpful to link and learn some appropriate strategies and to know their best practices that we can apply in our teaching".

Based on the responses of the participants, the institution never failed to inform, prepare, and equip teachers to adapt to the new normal. These are opportunities for a Higher Education Institution like Bukidnon State University to continue its operation amid the pandemic. During this trying time, the fields of expertise of teachers are teaching and learning. It means having a repertoire of ways at one's disposal to handle the task of teaching content and to know how to choose and apply what is appropriate from one's repertoire especially in emergency situation like the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, since the flexible learning was promulgated by CHED, BukSU and other HEIs conform to the call to implement such, so it is vital to provide teachers with an opportunity to have shared practices through webinars, to apply learned knowledge and skills in practice, and to understand their role in the larger whole of their profession.

Teaching and learning via webinars and web conferencing more broadly represents one widely used approach [9] to continue learning and updating knowledge

in the field of education. All learning should be applied in teaching. Thus, teacher's role is to monitor, direct, and regulate actions towards goals of information acquisition, expanding expertise, and self-improvement [4].

The participants also shared the following,

"I am utilizing differentiated instruction as a strategy for me to cater and connect to all of my students. For example, for my three classes with the same subject, the instruction varies in three modalities. In Class A, I conduct an online class. In Class B, I prepared ahead a pre-recorded lecture-discussion uploaded in the Google classroom, so students would just watch it at their own pace. In Class C, they are working with the activities found in their modules."

Teachers need more information and training about how students are doing and being served, not less. Now is a good time to collaborate with your professional learning communities to brainstorm and get creative in matching up your resources including people, programs, materials to students' knowledge, interests, and preferences and boost student growth toward their goals.

Based on how well students perform on any given topic, the content automates the delivery of differentiated instruction materials across various subject areas [18]. Differentiated instruction is one of the key aspects while delivering online lessons. The level of productive struggle offered and the level of instructional scaffolding is of great importance [12].

4 CONCLUSION

Based on the findings on the lived experiences of BukSU-CoE teachers in the content of flexible learning, two (2) major themes emerged. These themes include: challenging learning experiences and enhanced knowledge and expertise in learning content. Under the first emergent theme, there were three sub-themes yielded. These were the following: struggles to formulate instructions, outcomes, and instructional material; coping with the struggles in crafting the recalibrated syllabus and modules; and time constraints. While under the second emergent theme, there were two sub-themes that transpired including the selection of essential topics and scale-up teachers' training.

With these challenging learning experiences, these serve as their motivation to enhance their knowledge and expertise in the content of flexible learning especially on the selection of essential topics through trainings.

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