

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN VIRTUAL PURPOSEIVE COMMUNICATION: A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF ONLINE LEARNING EXPERIENCES

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ABSTRACT: Student engagement in virtual learning cannot be inferred from attendance or task submission alone, particularly in the General Education course Purposive Communication, where learning depends on interaction, audience awareness, collaborative meaning-making, and multimodal production. This transcendental phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of seven first-year students who encountered online instruction for the first time in a state university in Cagayan de Oro City during the first semester of academic year 2021-2022. Participants were selected through criterion-based purposive sampling and interviewed through Google Meet using a semi-structured guide. Data were analyzed through the modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen procedure associated with Moustakas' transcendental phenomenology. Two interrelated themes described engagement: collaborative participation through group production and creative agency through purposeful roles. Memes, infographics, persuasive vlogs, editing, planning, and leadership gave students visible ways to contribute to a shared communication product. The composite essence was engagement as purposeful collaborative production: students became behaviorally, cognitively, socially, and emotionally invested when they were responsible for a meaningful contribution to an audience-oriented output. The findings support deliberate use of authentic multimodal tasks and structured group roles, while remaining limited by the small, single-site, interview-based sample.

Keywords: student engagement; Purposive Communication; virtual learning; transcendental phenomenology; collaborative learning; multimodal tasks

INTRODUCTION

Student engagement in virtual learning

Student engagement is a multidimensional and context-sensitive construct rather than a simple count of attendance, log-ins, or completed requirements. It includes behavioral participation, emotional investment, cognitive effort, and the quality of learners' relationships with academic tasks and people [1,2]. This distinction is important in virtual environments because a student may be technically present while remaining socially isolated, cognitively passive, or hesitant to communicate.

Research on online higher education extends engagement beyond observable participation to include social, collaborative, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive involvement [3]. A systematic evidence map similarly found that educational technologies can support multiple dimensions of engagement, but the effects depend on how tools are connected to pedagogy, interaction, and meaningful learning activity [4]. Technology therefore creates possibilities for engagement; it does not guarantee engagement by itself.

Interaction is especially consequential online. Students value learner-to-instructor, learner-to-content, and learner-to-learner strategies, with clear communication, feedback, and collaborative activities reducing isolation and sustaining motivation [5]. At the same time, extensive online participation may be associated with weaker collaborative learning and lower-quality interaction when courses emphasize content delivery over purposeful exchange [6]. These contrasting findings indicate that engagement is produced through instructional design rather than through the virtual modality alone.

The Philippine pandemic context further complicates this relationship. Filipino college students reported problems with home learning environments, connectivity, finances,

interaction, mental health, and the overall quality of online learning [7]. Other qualitative evidence documented both the convenience of online study and substantial difficulty adjusting to technological, spatial, and time-management demands [8]. In Northern Mindanao, a transcendental phenomenological study of special education teachers showed that distance modalities reorganized professional practice and generated frustration, empathy, and adaptive responses [9]. Philippine structural evidence also linked course satisfaction with student engagement in online learning, underscoring that students' experiences of the course and its delivery are intertwined [10].

Purposive Communication and the research gap

Purposive Communication is distinct from content-heavy courses because learning is demonstrated through speaking, writing, presenting, interpreting audiences, and producing messages for specific purposes. In virtual delivery, these outcomes require students to move from passive reception to visible communication. Engagement Theory proposes that technology-supported learning becomes meaningful when students relate through collaboration, create a purposeful product, and contribute it to an audience beyond isolated practice [11]. The Community of Inquiry framework likewise emphasizes the interaction of social, cognitive, and teaching presence [12], while social constructivism positions learning as mediated through shared activity and discourse [13]. Online collaborative learning extends this principle by treating knowledge building as a process of idea generation, organization, and intellectual convergence [14].

The quality of such engagement also depends on the instructor's pedagogical decisions and the practical conditions of technology use. Philippine phenomenological evidence indicates that teachers' pedagogical beliefs, perceived norms, and intentions shape assessment practices [15]. Studies of Web 2.0 and instructional technology use in Northern Mindanao further show that perceived usefulness, ease of use,

behavioral intention, and facilitating conditions affect whether educators and learners adopt digital tools for instruction [16-18]. These studies are relevant because virtual communication activities can engage students only when the selected platforms are usable, accessible, and aligned with a clear communicative purpose.

Despite substantial research on online-learning challenges, technology adoption, and general indicators of student engagement, three gaps remain. First, many studies rely on surveys and aggregate students from different disciplines, which can obscure how engagement is experienced within a communication-intensive course. Second, research frequently treats engagement as an outcome score rather than examining how particular synchronous and asynchronous activities become meaningful to first-time online learners. Third, limited phenomenological evidence explains how Filipino students experience collaboration, creative production, and responsibility in virtual Purposive Communication. Addressing these gaps can clarify not only whether students participate, but what makes participation feel purposeful and educationally consequential.

Accordingly, this study explored the essence of first-year students' lived experiences of engagement in virtual Purposive Communication. It was guided by the question: What synchronous and asynchronous learning activities did students experience as enabling active engagement during the first semester of academic year 2021-2022, and how did they make sense of their participation in those activities?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research design

The study employed transcendental phenomenology to describe the common meaning and essence of participants' lived experiences. This design was appropriate because the inquiry concerned how students consciously experienced engagement during an unprecedented transition to virtual learning, rather than the prevalence of engagement in a population. Transcendental phenomenology emphasizes epoche or bracketing, systematic attention to significant statements, textural description of what was experienced, structural description of how it was experienced, and synthesis of a composite essence [19,20].

Setting and participants

The study was conducted at a Science and Technology university in Cagayan de Oro City, Philippines, during the first semester of academic year 2021-2022. Seven first-year college students participated. Criterion-based purposive sampling was used because phenomenological participants must have direct, information-rich experience of the phenomenon [21]. The inclusion criteria were that participants: (1) were first-year students enrolled in virtual Purposive Communication; (2) had not experienced formal online instruction before entering college; (3) could describe engagement activities from both synchronous and asynchronous classes; and (4) were not students of the researcher, reducing the risk of coercion or grade-related influence. The sample was intended to provide experiential depth rather than statistical representation.

Data collection

Data were collected through individual, in-depth interviews conducted through Google Meet using a semi-structured interview guide. The guide invited participants to describe the virtual activities that encouraged or constrained their participation, the roles they performed in group tasks, and the meanings they attached to these experiences. Follow-up questions were used to clarify concrete examples. Interview records were transcribed and anonymized using participant codes.

Phenomenological analysis

The analysis followed Creswell's modified presentation of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method derived from Moustakas [19,20]. The researcher first sought to bracket prior assumptions about what constitutes engagement. Statements directly related to the phenomenon were then identified and treated initially as having equal value through horizontalization. Repetitive or irrelevant statements were removed, and the remaining meaning units were clustered into themes. Textural descriptions summarized what participants experienced, while structural descriptions considered how the virtual setting, group organization, assigned roles, and digital production shaped those experiences. The final step synthesized the textural and structural descriptions into a composite essence. Verbatim excerpts were retained to connect each interpretation to participants' accounts.

Ethical considerations

Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent distributed electronically. Participants were informed of the purpose and procedures of the study, their right to decline or withdraw, and the measures used to protect confidentiality. Alphanumeric codes replaced names. Printed transcripts were stored in a locked cabinet, electronic files were kept on a secured storage device, and records were destroyed after completion of the study. Before submission, the authors must insert the institutional ethics-review information:

RESULTS

Theme 1: Collaborative participation through group production

Participants most consistently described engagement through collaborative production rather than through isolated attendance. Their accounts centered on asynchronous group activities that required members to plan, negotiate, and produce a shared communication output. Participant 4 explained, *"We have group activities like making memes, infographics on Varieties and Registers of Spoken and Written Language, and persuasive vlogs."* Participant 5 likewise identified discussions, persuasive vlogs, and meme-making as activities that sustained participation.

These examples show several dimensions of engagement operating together. Completing an assigned contribution reflected behavioral engagement; discussing content and deciding how to represent language concepts reflected cognitive engagement; coordinating with classmates reflected social engagement; and seeing the group's product take shape supported emotional investment. The tasks converted abstract course content into visible messages for an audience, making participation consequential to the group's success.

Theme 2: Creative agency through purposeful roles

Engagement intensified when participants held identifiable roles that gave them responsibility for the quality of the group's output. Participant 4 stated, *"I am the editor of the group; that is why I become more engaged in it."* Participant 5 similarly connected leadership with effort: *"As a leader of the group, ako gyud to grabe nga effort"* [As the leader of the group, I really exerted a great deal of effort]. Participant 7 described a broader coordinating role: *"I am the one who edits, then I am the leader, and I need to plan with the group and collect their views on how to implement the purpose and vision to be a successful student."* Participants 1, 2, 3, and 6 also described involvement in designing and editing video activities.

Editing, leadership, design, and coordination gave students agency: their decisions visibly altered the final product. The activities were also perceived as relevant to the participants' disciplinary backgrounds, particularly among information-technology students who were already developing digital production skills. Engagement therefore emerged not only from creativity but from the combination of competence, responsibility, peer dependence, and a recognizable purpose.

Composite essence of the experience

Across the two themes, the essence of engagement was purposeful collaborative production. Students experienced themselves as engaged when they could contribute something identifiable to a shared multimodal output and when the group depended on that contribution. The virtual environment did not automatically create engagement; rather, it provided a space in which communicative tasks, peer relationships, creative choices, and role-based accountability could converge.

DISCUSSION

Collaborative production as multidimensional engagement

The findings deepen the common description of engagement as active participation. The participants' accounts show that participation was meaningful because it involved interdependent production. Memes, infographics, and persuasive vlogs required students to interpret content, make rhetorical choices, coordinate work, and communicate a message. This pattern is consistent with the behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of engagement [1] and with online frameworks that add social and collaborative engagement [3]. It also supports the argument that educational technology is most engaging when it mediates active learning rather than merely distributes content [4].

The collaborative character of the tasks is particularly important for Purposive Communication. A persuasive vlog or infographic is not simply a technical product; it requires attention to audience, purpose, language register, visual meaning, and the relationship between ideas. Group production makes these decisions discussable. This reflects social constructivism and online collaborative learning, in which understanding is developed through discourse, negotiation, and the progressive organization of shared ideas [13,14]. It also resembles social and cognitive presence within the Community of Inquiry framework [12].

The findings of this study should not be interpreted to mean that any group assignment produces engagement. Online research shows that students may experience reduced collaboration and weaker interaction when course design does not provide meaningful structure [6]. In the present accounts, engagement was linked to concrete products, distributed tasks, and visible interdependence. This distinction helps explain why the activities were experienced positively despite the well-documented barriers faced by Filipino learners during pandemic online education [7,8].

Role-based responsibility, agency, and unequal participation

The second theme suggests that role ownership converted participation into personal responsibility. The editor and leader roles required planning, quality control, synthesis of peers' ideas, and persistence. These roles correspond to the relate-create-donate principles of Engagement Theory: students worked with others, produced a meaningful artifact, and oriented the artifact toward communication beyond the individual learner [11]. The resulting agency may explain why participants described greater effort rather than mere compliance.

However, the same evidence also raises an important caution. Leadership and editing roles can concentrate cognitive and technical labor in a small number of students, while quieter members remain peripheral. The accounts identify strong engagement among role holders but do not establish that responsibility was distributed equally. For virtual communication tasks, instructors may therefore define complementary roles, rotate responsibility, require individual process evidence, and create checkpoints where every member explains a rhetorical or content decision. Such structures can preserve creative autonomy while reducing free-riding and overburdening technically capable students.

Technology as an enabling condition rather than the source of engagement

The findings position technology as an enabling condition. Digital platforms allowed students to meet, edit, design, and publish, but engagement came from what students were asked to accomplish with those tools. This interpretation is consistent with Philippine evidence that pedagogical beliefs and intentions influence teachers' instructional and assessment choices [15]. An instructor who values authentic communication is more likely to design audience-centered outputs and assess the process of collaboration rather than equate engagement with camera use or online presence.

Technology acceptance remains consequential because purposeful activities fail when platforms are inaccessible or too difficult to use. Studies of Web 2.0 and instructional technology in Philippine public higher education show that performance expectancy, effort expectancy, behavioral intention, and facilitating conditions shape actual use [16,17]. The use of Web 2.0 tools for learning technical competencies likewise illustrates how practical and creative learning can be supported when learners perceive platforms as useful for accomplishing authentic tasks [18]. Thus, course design must align pedagogical purpose with low-friction tools, clear instructions, technical support, and alternatives for students with unstable connectivity.

Contribution to the understanding of virtual Purposive Communication

The study contributes a course-specific, experiential explanation of engagement. Whereas broad surveys can identify levels or predictors, phenomenology clarifies how engagement is lived. For these students, virtual engagement was not defined primarily by speaking frequently in synchronous meetings. It was experienced through collaborative, often asynchronous production in which students exercised communicative judgment and saw the consequences of their work. This finding expands the discussion of online engagement by showing that visible oral participation is only one form of engagement in a multimodal communication course.

The positive essence should nevertheless be interpreted in relation to the sample. Participants were selected because they could provide experience-rich accounts and had interest in the phenomenon. The prominence of information-technology students may also have made digital production less intimidating. The findings therefore illuminate a successful engagement pathway rather than prove that all students or all virtual Purposive Communication classes experience online learning in the same way.

Limitations and directions for further research

Several limitations restrict transferability. The study involved seven participants from one science and technology university and relied on retrospective interviews. It did not include classroom observation, learning-management-system records, student artifacts, instructor interviews, or accounts from students who withdrew or remained disengaged. The evidence reported in the source data was concentrated on asynchronous group tasks, although the research question referred to both synchronous and asynchronous classes. The study also did not quantify the distribution of disciplinary programs or document data saturation. Consequently, the results should be understood as an interpretive account of a bounded group rather than a comprehensive evaluation of the course.

Future research may triangulate interviews with observation, digital trace data, peer-evaluation records, and samples of multimodal work. Comparative studies could examine students with different levels of digital access, disciplinary backgrounds, and communication apprehension. Longitudinal inquiry could determine whether role-based engagement in virtual tasks transfers to later oral presentations, academic writing, teamwork, and professional communication.

CONCLUSION

The lived experience of engagement in virtual Purposive Communication was constituted by collaborative production and creative responsibility. Students became engaged when group activities required them to make memes, infographics, persuasive vlogs, and videos and when editing, leadership, design, or coordination made their contribution visible and necessary. The composite essence was purposeful collaborative production: engagement emerged from the interaction of a meaningful communication task, peer interdependence, creative agency, and accountability.

For practice, virtual Purposive Communication may use authentic multimodal outputs, explicit audience and purpose,

structured and rotating group roles, formative checkpoints, and accessible technology choices. These strategies do not eliminate connectivity or equity problems, but they create conditions in which online participation can become cognitive, social, emotional, and communicative work. The study offers a situated explanation rather than a universal claim; broader and triangulated research is needed to test how consistently this engagement pathway operates.

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