RESEARCH ARTICLE

Lived Experiences of BASC Students in the New Normal and its Implication for Instructional Effectiveness: A Grounded Theory Study

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Abstract

COVID-19 Pandemic has forced the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) to mandate Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the Philippines the paradigm shift of teaching-learning to distance learning called Flexible Learning Modality (FLM). Dealing with this, to determine the lived experiences of Bulacan Agricultural State College (BASC) students in the new normal and its implication for instructional effectiveness, this Grounded theory study aimed to describe the students' perception on the use of FLM, to determine the challenges and opportunities that students face in the new normal to determine ways to improve the teaching-learning process through the use of FLM. With the purposive sampling as the technique for acquiring the number of informants, and constructivist design of coding in generating assumptions, themes and core categories, a total of five emerging themes were extracted, namely (1) Work-study balance; (2) engaging, interactive and convenient; (3) less engaging, less effective and less interactive; (4) internet-related issues; and (5) leniency for sanity were the emerging themes extracted from the responses. The researchers developed a theoretical model from the responses of ten student-informants. The generated model describes the challenges and opportunities of students in the use of FLM that are influenced by the teacher factor, connectivity factor, and time factor. These challenges and opportunities led to several implications which will serve as grounds for the instructional effectiveness of FLM in tertiary education.

Keywords: Flexible Learning Modality; lived experiences; Grounded theory; Challenges and Opportunities; Instructional effectiveness

Introduction

Year 2020 unprecedentedly led educators to distance education in the blink of an eye due to the threat of Coronavirus Disease (COVID) - 19 pandemic. As the World Health Organization (WHO) advised, the education sector must mitigate academic freeze and cancellations for the school year 2020-2021. Instead, different countries have been conducting several alternative learning methodologies and modalities to sustain the sphere of education and to continue to serve with quality education despite the health emergency crisis in line with the "New Normal" style of living.

Insubordinate to the advisory of WHO, in the Philippines, particularly in tertiary education, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) mandated the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to shift their paradigm in teaching-learning from Traditional way of teaching, also known as the Face-to-face Learning to distance learning called "Flexible Learning Modality." Under the CHED Memorandum Order No. 4, s. 2020 contains the "Guidelines in the Implementation of Flexible Learning," this learning modality for HEIs is a pedagogical approach that allows flexibility on students' time, place, and audience but is not solely focused on the use of technology. Aside from, CMO No. 4 also identified that despite being in the use of technologies to gain education, its pedagogical features might vary on the levels of technology, availability of resources, internet connectivity, level of digital literacy, and approaches that are the main concerns of students who are in this kind of modality.

In Bulacan Agricultural State College, a local state college in Bulacan that did not experience this kind of modality since it was founded, the institution formulated the BASC- Flexible Learning Plan for the AY 2020-2021

that was approved by the BASC Board of Trustees under BOT Resolution 20-1309 on July 31, 2020. BASC-FLP mandates the approach of a combination of "Synchronous" (Online discussion of instructors through Google Meet, Zoom etc.) and "Asynchronous" (Modular Approach) classes with the aid of Google Classroom. Although this kind of set-up is very adaptable to students regardless of race, concerns, and internet connectivity, it is difficult for the teaching-learning process to occur in these trying times. Many educators are in search of possible and effective ways to deliver learning to students so that the health and safety of the public would not be compromised.

In the midst of this unusual learning modality, the school had a strong outcome in terms of students' learning as it stated that Philippine schools were ready to conduct this kind of learning modality that is why it is a need for teachers to enhance their Information and Communication Technology (ICT) capability as knowledge providers (Lapada, 2020).

Nevertheless, it is vital to consider the students' lived-experiences in this kind of learning scenario, particularly in the use of online platforms; Google Classroom and Google Meet, to formulate such theories or models for learning that may be considered as a basis for future researches with the nature of Flexible Learning Modality. In addition, through this study, the instructional effectiveness of the said learning modality may be assessed, and some modifications, recommendations, and improvements would be suggested.

Research Literature

Currently, the fastest-growing sector of higher education is through the online platform has gained popularity whether on or off-campus. However, some issues are relevant to the quality and effectiveness of online distance learning employed in higher education compared to the conventional educational pattern (Markova, Glazkova & Zaborova, 2016).

Due to the world's current situation, wherein the COVID-19 pandemic leads us into using online technology as a new modality of the teaching-learning process, higher education is undergoing change. This situation for tertiary education technically whereby technology is used to mediate learning for an increasingly diverse student population (Wozniak & McEldowney, 2015). Although educational online technologies (EOTs) have transformed the delivery of learning in higher education, significant EOT challenges have impeded their effectiveness, preventing widespread implementation (Tuapawa, 2017).

Also, the situation on the HEIs today shows that there is a need for alternative learning modalities or online learning systems based on the advisory set by the CHED, which pertains to the continuity plan of different institutions regarding the issue. Mobo (2020) tested the effectiveness of different Learning Management Systems (LMS) in terms of their speed, accuracy, reliability, and security then, it resulted in significant results in terms of statistical treatment. Likewise, the scope of the LMS amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and the suspension of academic institutions due to national lockdown and community quarantine are pushing for online learning. Nevertheless, the use of a learning management system could help deliver educational material paperless.

In line with the changes in the education system, students may have experienced different challenges and difficulties in coping with it. Students' lack of advanced equipment refers to software and hardware issues that are not well-suited for virtual medical education. It also refers to library resources and access to databases that indicate the need for more attention to the content management system (Sarvestani, Mohammadi, Afshin & Raeisy, 2019). In connection to this, emotion also plays a critical role in constructing meaning and knowledge of the self in the adult learning process, and online learning, without the proper tools for engagement, can be an isolating experience (Torres, 2020).

Flexible learning in this context encompassed online learning, blended learning, competency-based education, and open educational resources. Online and blended courses are two common approaches to flexible learning, and are often aimed at the needs of diverse learners, who are balancing school, work, and family (Andrade & Rivers, 2019). Effective online learning has the potential to impact individuals, families, organizations, and society. For instance, the participants indicated that students have time to attend other activities (Gossai, 2020). In designing a flexible learning environment, it is imperative to look at the factors that affect such implementation, such as the internet access of the students and the availability of devices for online learning (Abisado, Unico, Umoso, Manuel & Barroso, 2020).

In a study conducted, most students strongly agreed (10.8%) and agreed (54.2%) that they did not experience difficulties in LMS without the acquaintance and appropriate guidance from others. Congruent to the study, it added that 41% of the students agreed and 25.3% strongly agreed that online learning communities do not promote social isolation with their colleagues (Ullah, 2018). The findings of this study indicated that Google Meet and Google Classroom as learning community platforms for online learning has an impact on students' learning in the flexible modality of schooling.

In some ways, additional research of Osman (2017) suggested that if teachers do not value the use of pedagogies that collaboratively engage students in different inquiries, nor see value in helping students understand the nature of online-blended learning, and they may not value the use of Google Classroom tools to support these approaches. In addition, the study concluded that teachers must be trained to use these e-learning modalities to improve their teaching capabilities and efficiency.

Besides, contrary to the above claims, Alim, Alimin, Linda and Saad (2019) showed that the use of Google Classroom was effective with various limitations: (1) not all students got an account of what was provided by the lecturers because they did not have a smartphone, (2) Wi-Fi availability in the campus was limited and (3) the students did not have enough mobile data plan during the time of online discussion, and even some students submitted their assignments using their friends' account.

The general problem of the study is: to determine the lived experiences of Bulacan Agricultural State College students in the new normal and its implication for instructional effectiveness. Specifically, the study aims to (1) describe the students' perception of the use of Flexible Learning Modality, (2) to determine the challenges and opportunities that students face in the new normal and (3) to determine ways to improve the teaching-learning process through Flexible Learning Modality.

Methodology

The research utilized a Qualitative study in a Grounded Theory Approach wherein the researchers are referring to the process of building theories/models from data gathered (Birks and Mills, 2015). As described as "the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained and analyzed," Glaser and Straus (1967) introduced this rigorous qualitative research method that would enable the systematic collection of data, coding, and analysis of data. In dealing with their explanation, Grounded Theory research consists of critical elements for the discovery process, including (a) systematic obtaining of data, (b) constant comparative method of qualitative analysis, and (c) generation of theory.

Specifically, Grounded Theory research includes an inductive data collection and analytic method, that is why in the qualitative data collection of this study, a researcher-made open-ended questionnaire was utilized. Through this set of questions, the researchers gathered participants' lived-experiences about the topic to probe these as needed data to obtain more detailed descriptions and explanations of experiences, behaviors, and beliefs (Acosta, 2020). However, this approach is fitted with the current pandemic-laden education scenario as the BASC has its first time to be in this kind of learning modality, and the findings of this study may be a ground or theoretical basis for future research.

On the other hand, this kind of research design is probably, a Qualitative type as it involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data (e.g., text, video, or audio) to understand concepts, opinions, or experiences through in-depth insights into a problem or generate new ideas (Bhandari, 2020).

With relevance to these, as defined by Martin and Turner (1986 as cited by Bayubay, Liongson & Manalang, 2015), the Grounded Theory Approach allows researchers to develop a theoretical account of the general features of a topic while simultaneously grounding the account employing empirical observations of the gathered interview responses. This study seeks to understand deeper the advantages and disadvantages of Flexible Learning Modality (as a phenomenon) and to create a theory/theoretical model based on the data gathered through data analysis through different stages of coding.

As mentioned, the interview questionnaires, consisting of researcher-made open-ended questions, were asked to the student-participants. The lived-experiences of the participants about Flexible Learning Modality in teaching-learning were transcribed, coded, and thematized (if the situation would be given, the researcher may translate the responses of the students with their preferred medium of language if they cannot speak fluently in English) in order to extract the possible theory/model that those responses represented.

Before conducting the study, the researchers sought permission from the President of Bulacan Agricultural State College (BASC). Upon receiving the approved permit, the researcher coordinated with the Deans of different institutes for the schedule of quantitative data collection.

After the deliberation of the researchers in choosing the participants, the researchers formulated a written consent for the chosen participants as part of the protocols before starting an interview (Padget, 2017). Further, the researchers conducted the actual data gathering by means of a Semi-structured interview. The researchers developed and used an "interview guide" or a list of questions and topics that need to be covered during the conversation, usually in a particular order (Cohen & Crabtree, 2016). Moreover, as the current pandemic limits the face-to-face data gathering of researchers, the interview was held via Google Meet and was recorded for data coding.

In this matter, Coding was used as the process of data analysis as defined by Charmanz (2006) and Urquhart (2013) as the process of attaining conceptual labels into data. The researchers based the data analysis procedure on the steps given by Lichtman (2006) namely: Creating Initial Coding, Revisiting Initial Coding, Developing the list of central ideas, Modifying the initial list, Moving from codes to themes/concepts and Theory Generation. Later, after extracting the core concept/category, a theory/theoretical model was generated.

Purposive sampling was implemented in this study, a sampling technique that implies intentional selection of participants based on their ability to get a specific theme, the concept of phenomenon (Robinson, 2014). The researchers interviewed two students as participants in each institute/college of BASC Main campus in Pinaod, San Ildefonso, Bulacan (Institute of Education, Institute of Management, Institute of Engineering and Applied Technology, and College of Agriculture) and the satellite BASC Campus in Doña Remedios Trinidad, Bulacan.

Results and Discussion

Five emerging themes arose from the analysis of the informants' responses. Following are the themes illuminated through the rich quotations of the respondents' experiences on Flexible Learning Modality of Bulacan Agricultural State College: (1) work-study balance, (2) engaging, interactive, and convenient; (3) less engaging, less effective, and less interactive, (4) internet-related issues; and (5) leniency for sanity.

Emerging Themes
Theme 1: Work-study balance. One of the most common themes identified by the researchers was the flexibility of the current educational modality of BASC. Informants expressed that Flexible Learning Modality is advantageous for working students who devote and divide their time studying while working. Students appreciate the opportunity of having balanced time that they can render for their errands as students and workers.

Most of the informants shared their positive experiences about the many advantages that BASC's Flexible Learning Modality can provide flexible time opportunities, bonding with the family, less on expenses and waste of resources, and freedom of time. These passages imply that Flexible Learning Modality is a time-friendly education mode and opportunity for students to hit two birds in a single stone wherein they can have their academic while they are engaged in other worthwhile activities.

Connecting to the implication of the findings from students' response regarding the essence of Flexible Learning as they can balance their studies and work, it was supported Joan (2013) in his study where he found that Flexible learning molds the learners' capability to plan, manage and organize their own time according to their interest and enthusiasm.

Successful student engagement in a distance-laden education may have if time management is present, according to Kartikasari (2021). His study revealed that knowing the students' attitudes and willingness to be engaged in distance learning is somehow difficult, but it may lessen if he or she can balance his time for studies and other related or non-related errands for everyday living. Uzir and Gazevic (2020) seconded this previous assumption through their study, wherein they correlated the students' academic performance on their capability to manage and balance their time under distance learning. The study had a conclusion that the main advantage of distance-laden education over the existing ones is that it combines the time management and learning tactic dimensions of learning strategies.

Theme 2: Engaging, Interactive, and Convenient.
Based on the views given by the informants, the researchers identified that the Flexible Learning Modality of BASC is engaging, interactive, and convenient for the students. BASC students appreciate the convenience of Flexible Learning Modality as it allows them to use their time wisely and study at their own pace. Students still find this learning mode an engaging and interactive way of learning through the internet and gadgets.

The students' engagement during Flexible Learning Modality pertains to the motivation they have because of the materials provided by the teachers. In order to make learning an engaging process/activity, teachers should provide materials that will encourage students to answer. On the report published by Bybee, Taylor, Gardner, Scotter, Powell, Westbrook, and Landes (2006) stated that asking a question, defining a problem, showing a discrepant event, and acting out a problematic situation are all ways to engage the students and focus them on the instructional task. The role of the teacher is to present the situation and identify the instructional task. The teacher also sets the rules and procedures for establishing the task—successful engagement results in students being puzzled by, and actively motivated in, the learning activity.

Interaction is an important variable to achieve student satisfaction, and we must strive to improve our online learning system so that students can more easily interact in online learning (Muzammil, Sutawijay, & Harsasi, 2020). Interactive learning using Flexible Learning Modality is not the traditional interaction that we know. In FLM, it pertains to the student's interaction with the teachers, students, and learning material/content using the platforms given or available. Google Classroom, WebQuest, Zoom, Kotobee, FB Messenger (Toquero, 2020), and other online sites are the most common tools or software applications used to hold classes and communicate with the teachers and with the students.

Flexible Learning Modality is considered a convenient way to study based on the informants' experiences. Faculty opined that online learning helped ensure remote learning, it was manageable, and students could conveniently access teachers and teaching materials (Mukhtar, Javed, Arooj, & Sethi, 2020). Student-informants stated that the FLM is convenient because they may access files, video or audio lessons, and activities anytime they want. Also, it is convenient for them to study during FLM because they save time and energy to travel and stay inside the school as for now, they are at the comfort of their own home or of their chosen location. These advantages are also viewed through distance learning as it has four advantages. These are flexibility of learning whenever and wherever the students are, no commuting since learning takes place online, significant cost savings since students do not have to rent houses near the campus and they can save on food, and convenient learning since learners can learn at their own pace (Brown 2015, as cited in Delute & Ada, 2021).

The transcripts of the interviewers showed that the students viewed Flexible Learning Modality as a positive way to learn during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students

still find learning as engaging and interactive, and at the same time, it is convenient for them.

Theme 3: Less Engaging, Less Effective, and Less Interactive. The difference between Flexible Learning and traditional learning is its effect on the students. Flexible learning uses different online platforms to send the learning to the students while the traditional is going to the school to gain education. However, its effects on the students are different. Students under flexible learning are experiencing different problems that hinder their learning. Informants expressed that Flexible Learning Modality is not engaging, ineffective, and not interactive in some ways.

Martin and Bolliger (2018) mentioned that student engagement increases student satisfaction, enhances student motivation to learn, reduces the sense of isolation, and improves student performance in online courses. With the flexible learning set-up in the BASC, responses from the informants may be interpreted that there is less engagement on their part, and they seem to be not or less satisfied with the manner they are learning, for they mention that they miss certain aspects that they use to have when they still have the face-to-face learning. Educational materials and outputs that they use to have and get during face-to-face learning.

Being at home has given them more distraction on studying than being focused on it during face-to-face learning. Focus on studying and learning is important and that is justified by the Behaviorism Theory on Learning. According to behaviorists, learning is dependent on a person's interactions with their external environment. According to behaviorists, learning is dependent on a person's interactions with their external environment. As people experience consequences from their interactions with the environment, they modify their behaviors in reaction to those consequences. (Saunders & Wong, 2020) A change on the learning environment from having a conducive classroom to your home has given alteration on focus on learning. Classroom environment is one of the most important factors that affect student learning. An ideal learning classroom is when students view their classrooms as positive and supportive. It is a space where they feel safe and secure (Geeta Verma, 2019).

A research study by Miliszewskai (2017) investigated students' attitudes towards fully-online provision of computing education programs in one of the most important Australian transnational education markets: Hong Kong. The survey revealed that students did not regard the fully-online provision of transnational programs as a preferred alternative to the current model – that one is based on face-to-face communication and uses the Internet for support. Their opposition was pronounced and ranged from total rejection of fully-online provision in one of the programs. However, the researcher had considered that the study was conducted decades ago. The researcher may deduce that the technological requisite for online learning among the informants were already dated and the majority does not yet meet current requirements.

Many students do not have the same level of online connectivity as they do in person. To begin with, engaging in person is more accessible than engaging through a screen. Face-to-face instruction also aids in the organization of students' studies. They are given the opportunity to communicate with their professors and classmates. So, I much prefer to choose traditional learning.

The responses imply that Flexible Learning is less engaging, less effective, and interactive due to several factors. They lack internet connectivity and access. They seek social interaction that they see in face-to-face learning. They find it hard to concentrate due to a less conducive learning environment which the school usually provides, and their house will remain as a home where they can have other roles and responsibilities. With this mixed-up environment, they find it ineffective to learn.

Theme 4: Internet-related Issues. These are the issues that most of the informants encountered, which became the hurdles of this new normal learning system. They believed that these are the challenges and problems they usually encounter during synchronous and asynchronous classes. Thus, it became a barrier to the students' learning in this present pandemic situation.

Every endeavor deserves the needed materials to push through and be successful. In this Flexible Learning Modality, the essential material needed is the students' mobile phones, IPADs, tablets and laptops, and an internet connection. Thus, stable and good internet connectivity and the availability of technological devices are two of the basic requirements in the online learning process. The internet access of the students and the availability of devices for online learning are the factors that will affect the implementation of the flexible learning environment as per its design. (Abisado, Unico, Umoso, Manuel & Barroso, 2020)

The financial capacity of the family and the learning environment at home are the two areas of concern involving this sub-theme. These sub-themes also supports some related study that revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic had the most significant impact on the quality learning experience of students, with the greatest challenge linked to their experiences in the learning environment at home. (Barrot, Llenares & Del Rosario, 2021)

The recorded interviews of the students manifested the challenges and issues that they encountered in the conduct of the Flexible Learning Modality during this pandemic situation. The migration from the Face-to-Face classes to online learning setup is a sudden shift; therefore, it requires coping strategies and support to students to alleviate the hurdles and challenges in implementing Flexible Learning Modality as the new normal.

Theme 5: Leniency for Sanity. After the selective coding, researchers were able to form an abstraction based on the informants' views of the pressing situation in the new normal. Based on the analysis of responses, most of the informants have expressed their recommendation for the instructors and professors for leniency in the use of Flexible Learning Modality in the new normal. They really appreciate the teachers' efforts to provide a meaningful teaching-learning process, but many of them opted to have compassion, most especially to those students experiencing technical difficulties.

Faculty must provide compassion for the student during these pressing times. This further supports the claim that being considerate is the key in online teaching, not just to emphasize the social presence, but also to promote better means for the teaching-learning process (Swan & Shih, 2005).

Encompassing this theme, several participants expressed the importance of the use of technology by the faculty to maximize the use of resources. The teachers and the students must have open communication to facilitate the reshaping of assessment in the teaching-learning process during this pandemic (Cahapay, 2020).

Further analysis of this theme captured the need for attention not only on how the teacher utilizes the technology but also on how they engage their students. This supports the premise that teachers were recommended to be active online and must address students' sentiments during these trying times (Dangle & Sumaoang, 2020).

The present research employed the Grounded Theory on a constructivist lens which enabled the researchers to elicit multiple meanings from the lived experiences of informants (BASC students) in the new normal and its implication for instructional effectiveness. As Charmaz (2001) mentioned, constructivist grounded theorists are required to become analytical in the form of their writings; however, the style must be suggestive of the participants' experiences. These experiences must be collected through the immersion of the researchers. Also, coding captures the lived experiences in the foreground (Charmaz, 2000).

Regarding this, the analysis resulted in core categories based on the emerging themes: Work-study balance; Engaging, interactive and convenient; Less engaging, less effective, and less interactive; Internet-related issues; and Leniency for sanity was made. Further, an emerging theoretical model was proposed by the researchers.

"Work-Study Balance" (Emerging Theme 1) is manifested in the students' perception regarding the Flexible Learning Modality of BASC. Specifically, through their insights, this pandemic-laden educational approach gives flexible time opportunities. They have the chance to have their studies while attending other errands; specifically, the majority of the students of BASC are working students. It may be reflected that if this educational system is present, students can utilize their time working while studying. Regarding this, even the teaching-learning process amidst pandemic is more arduous; they can use and manage their time wisely by hitting two tasks in one shot. Flexible Learning allows students to decipher when and how to learn their capabilities.

All the same, current education permits bonding with the family as the students attend their synchronous and asynchronous classes at home with their families; students may lessen the stress that they feel. It can be seen that students are learning while they are with their loved ones, and this idea has a positive impact on their academic performance.

Flexible Learning is less on expenses and waste of resources as per the students since face-to-face classes are restricted. At present, they are not exerting much financial effort to attain knowledge and skills academically. It can be noted that in a flexible type of learning modality, students' expenses and waste of resources decline. This learning system minimizes expenditures and prevents waste of energy and effort to go to school, manage resources such as baon, etc. They are usually allocated then the class was still face-to-face.

Students have freedom of time in a flexible-schemed learning process. Upon seeing their responses, at present, they have the prerogative in terms of handling the phasing of their everyday duties. It can be surmised that if students are in a distance learning mode, they can manage their time. Students now can have their more complex Time and Activity Plan to attend the tasks intended for them in every hour that passes; they now have ample time to spend for their classes, whether synchronous or asynchronous and even their personal tasks as working students or part of a family.

In general, Theme 1 (Work-Study Balance) showed a core category that Flexible Learning Modality provides students with the accountability of their learning time as they have complete control of their time that leads to producing better results in working-schooling matters, time management, being with loved ones while learning and reducing expenses and waste of resources. This control allows them to coordinate their education around their commitments and ensures that they are learning at the best time. Therefore, the flexibility of this flexible-laden education in speaking of time has a huge impact on how students learn.

Flexible Learning Modality is a new method of teaching and learning for the students and faculty of Bulacan Agricultural State College. Due to the current pandemic, the education system has changed and evolved. Along with those changes are the adjustments and challenges that the students and teachers are experiencing. In this study, one of the themes that emerged is the view of the students that Flexible Learning Modality is Engaging, Interactive, and Convenient that revealed that the learning materials used for instructions are engaging, interactive, and convenient to use by the students during flexible

learning. In addition, the engagement and interaction in this mode of learning are not only on the learning materials but is also on the delivery of instructions and engagement between students and instructors.

In the present condition of the education system, students find motivation on the different learning materials that their instructors are using and sharing with them through the chosen online platforms such as Google Classroom, Google Meet, and Facebook. An informant mentioned that having a copy of learning materials is a good start for them to learn. The instructors also delivered the lesson the same as how it was during the face-to-face classes. Instructors also try to make learning easier for the students as this system is very new. The combination of suitable learning materials and lesson delivery could make the students feel motivated and engaged in the learning process.

The interaction of the students and instructors during classes has changed a lot due to the present situation. In that case, interactive learning should not be sacrificed, and with that, interaction takes place virtually in the comfort of our own home. As mentioned by one of the informants, Flexible Learning Modality allows them to decide on how they will interact and gain knowledge using their own choice of learning approach. In this kind of learning modality, the activities to be given to the students should not only be limited to individual activities. Instead, the instructors should also give them group activities in order for the students to have interaction with the students and experience interactive learning.

Based on the informants' responses, Flexible Learning Modality is a convenient way to study during this time of pandemic. This mode of learning is convenient according to different aspects and situations. Flexible Learning Mode is convenient since the student may learn based on their own pace as well as it allows them to save time, money, and energy for traveling. During the interview, one of the informants mentioned that FLM is convenient for them because it permits them to access the presentations, and they can watch the recorded video discussions using their gadgets anytime they want to. It is also convenient for the students to answer their activities, quizzes, and other schoolwork based on their schedule as long as they will submit it within the time frame given by their instructors.

Generally, the instructional materials given to the students played an important role in making Flexible Learning Modality a successful way of teaching and learning process at Bulacan Agricultural State College. It allows the students to engage and interact with other students and their instructors conveniently. Added to that, instructional materials that are easy to understand and follow can also help the students be motivated and do their tasks as easily as possible.

The study of Martin and Bolliger (2018) can be relied on the theme Less Engaging, Less Effective as it mentioned

that student engagement increases student satisfaction, enhances student motivation to learn, reduces the sense of isolation, and improves student performance in online courses. With the flexible learning set-up in the BASC, responses from the informants may be interpreted that there is less engagement on their part, and they seem to be not or less satisfied with the manner they are learning, for they mention that they miss certain aspects that they use to have when they still have the face-to-face learning. Teachers may have to consider creating more supplementary materials for learning to bring back the students' satisfaction towards learning.

The researchers stipulated from the s of the study vis-à-vis the Constructive Theory of learning that learning is a constructive process where teachers try out specified activities in the classroom with students and then debrief the results with other teachers in the same classroom (Borko, 2014). Teachers must be able to converse honestly and address issues such as the best ways to teach a class. Teachers are generally eager to talk about teaching with others, but rarely do teachers share their thoughts and ideas about teaching and practice ways to improve their skills in the context of classroom students and other teachers (Borko, 2014). With the constructive theory, learning needs social interaction, and with the informants' responses, they find more motivation on learning when they can have an actual interaction in the face-to-face classroom set-up.

Contrary to the findings manifested in this study, students are likely to experience less engagement and learning with technology as opposed to the fundamentals of the Engagement Theory that technology is good in facilitating interactive classes and collaborative learning; this may result in engagement in learning.

On the flip side, the difference between Flexible Learning and traditional learning is its effect on the students. Flexible learning uses different online platforms that can send the learning to the students while the traditional is going to the school to gain education. However, its effects on the students are different, students that are under flexible learning are experiencing different problems that hinder their learning. Being at home has given them more distraction on studying than being focused on it during face-to-face learning. Focus on studying and learning is essential, and the Behaviorism Theory justifies that on learning. According to behaviorists, learning is dependent on a person's interactions with their external environment. According to behaviorists, learning is dependent on a person's interactions with their external environment. As people experience consequences from their interactions with the environment, they modify their behaviors in reaction to those consequences. (Saunders & Wong, 2020)

The researchers may infer that BASC students find it less engaging, less effective, and interactive learning on the flexible learning due to several factors. They lack internet connectivity and access. They seek social interaction that

they see in face-to-face learning. They find it hard to concentrate due to a less conducive learning environment which the school usually provides, and their house will remain as a home where they can play other roles and responsibilities. With this mixed-up environment, they find it ineffective to learn. The classic theory from Lev Vygotsky, his learning theory on social interaction, was reflected in the findings that stipulated that online learning is less interactive and less engaging. The constructivism theory supported the result that there is less effective learning on online learning over face-to-face, for the theory surmised that there is a need for the presence and facilitation of the teacher, instead of having to do a self-study throughout the whole learning process. The classic behaviorism theory in learning also supported the result of the responses about the learning environment and the preference of going to school than staying at home (online class). The students' behavior towards having a conducive learning environment is much preferable to learn effectively over having a typical learning environment such as their personal space or home.

By examining the participants' lived experiences using axial coding, emerging themes were translated by the researchers. One of the identified themes is Internet-related issues as a learning avenue. This emerging theme pointed out that there were barriers in the transition from the traditional face-to-face learning to the new-normal flexible learning set-up. It exposed the need for a conducive learning climate as a requirement for an effective learning approach. Furthermore, sub-themes also emerged as classifications in the barriers were conveyed by the researchers. These include the Technology and Technical Challenges and Socio-Economic Issues that can be referred to as the climate or environment that has a greater impact on the flexible learning path or the Learning Avenue.

Pandemic led to the use of online learning since there was a directive from the government to stop the face-to-face classes due to the threats of COVID-19. This innovation in the learning modality has a sudden impact on the learners since it is far more different from the face-to-face or the traditional set up compared with an ideal classroom climate. Ideal classroom climate is the one with comfortable classroom set-ups, relevant teaching materials, and interesting classroom activities that further motivate the students to learn (Chonghui, 2020). Conversely, the flexible learning model is learner-centered and encourages greater autonomy and independence on the part of the learner with less supervision of the teachers in an online set-up. Technology facilitates and enables the web of interaction (Teras & Kartoglu, 2017) and the home as the learning environment together will create the conducive climate for a learning environment that is an avenue for effective learning.

With all the benefits of the flexible learning modality as learner-centered, the learners have a greater control on their learning outcomes. The respondents, however, identified barriers in the implementation of this new-normal learning mood that hinders the diffusion of this new instructional innovation. Respondents believed that a very poor internet connection, slow signal, and distractions at home is an unconducive learning climate that greatly affects their participation in virtual discussion, submission of learning outputs and evaluation assessment, and access to the learning materials.

A comprehensive analysis of the responses from the informants revealed that face-to-face learning is much preferred compared to the flexible learning modality due to the presence of the barriers like technology and technical challenges, and socio-economic issues that they had experienced. These barriers hinder the acceptance of this new learning modality which can also be considered an innovation in teaching. This flexible learning modality can be an avenue for effective learning if all the barriers are prevented and challenges and issues will be resolved.

These barriers that hinder adopting the teaching and learning modality innovation will be addressed in time since this pandemic is not a permanent phenomenon. The socio-economic barrier is a result of the unemployment brought about by these COVID-19, and the technology and technical challenges can be addressed through proper planning and implementation programs that will address all these barriers that BASC students are experiencing nowadays that influence them to not fully adopt the said to be new-normal in education which is the Flexible Learning Modality.

Leniency for Sanity revealed a need for instructors of BASC to be more compassionate to students, particularly during this time of pandemic while on the Flexible Learning Modality. Furthermore, several sub-themes point out that leniency is a must for the students' mental soundness in these trying times, which can be implemented by paying attention to how the teacher utilizes the technology and how they engage their students.

The present situation requires teacher's compassion that can somehow create an atmosphere conducive for the students while being confronted with challenges in the implementation of FLM. Students were pining for a longer grace period in the submission of tasks; patience and understanding that most of them could not attend the synchronous class; and, ample time to comprehend the materials being provided to them since most of them are not technologically inclined. As mentioned by one of the informants, mental health is one of the pressing issues they are facing. They believe that if the teacher is compassionate, there will be an opportunity for an encouraging set-up in some way.

Open communication between the students and the instructor may provide a better feedback mechanism that can facilitate an effective and efficient teaching-learning

process. Additionally, being approachable on the part of the teacher enables a healthier rapport that can effortlessly execute the question-and-answer portion during the discussion and during the asynchronous mode. An informant has mentioned during the interview that he does not feel ashamed when clarifying things when a teacher is approachable. It is a clear picture of how communication plays a vital role in building confidence in students and reflective opportunity on the part of the teacher.

The investigation of the responses captured from the informants revealed that Sympathy is the key to promoting a meaningful and pleasurable learning environment for the students during this time of the pandemic. As one of the informants mentioned, being appreciated made them feel that all their efforts and hard work paid off. Thus, it will further inspire them to go the extra mile in studying amidst adversaries. The students' experiences suggest that teaching-learning must not be limited by a one-way system where the teacher only teaches without being empathetic to the student's position. As explored in the study, a teacher must have a more profound sense of consideration for students. It will not only benefit the students who are struggling to cope, but it will also help them feel at ease that they are not alone and being taken for granted.

Overall, if students are motivated, the chances that they will give their best to learn and accomplish tasks in the Flexible Learning Modality are high. In light of the foregoing, teacher's compassion, open communication, and sympathy are the key elements that will enable the students of BASC to thrive in the new-normal based on the captured experiences of the informants. These will allow enthusiasm among the students and teachers to succeed in the teaching-learning practice, but they will also provide a feedback mechanism that will further improve their educational experiences, especially in these trying times.

Overview of the emerging theoretical model
The below theoretical model describes the challenges and opportunities that BASC students have experienced since the Flexible Learning Modality was implemented due to the COVID-19 Pandemic.
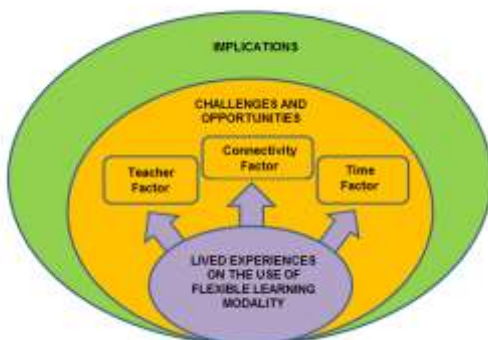

Figure 1. Emerged model on Flexible Learning Modality implementation to BASC students

This theoretical model indicated the implications of these challenges and opportunities for the instructional effectiveness of this new approach in teaching tertiary education. The theoretical model postulates that informants' experiences in FLM are best understood as an interaction between teacher, connectivity, and time factors. The unifying idea binds together these factors as Challenges and Opportunities. Several implications were drawn from the challenges and opportunities. Through this theoretical model, recommendations were suggested by the proponents for the betterment of instruction using FLM.

As the findings of this study indicated, five emerging themes can be noted after analyzing informants' responses. The core concept of these five themes was observed to validate the phases leading to the conceptualization of the above theoretical model.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to determine the lived experiences of Bulacan Agricultural State College students in the new normal and its implication for instructional effectiveness. In light of the study's findings, the conclusion that the Flexible Learning Modality utilized by the BASC manifested the five themes: work-study balance; engaging, interactive and convenient; less engaging, less effective and less interactive; internet-related issues; and leniency for sanity. Furthermore, the presented components of the emerging theoretical model describe the challenges and opportunities of BASC in FLM, including its implications.

Appendices
Appendix 1. Interview Questionnaire
1. What are the benefits of being in a Flexible Learning class?
2. What hurdles have you encountered during this Flexible Learning Modality?
3. How does the Flexible Learning differ from traditional (face-to-face) learning?
4. Does a Flexible Learning class offers aspects that a traditional classroom setting does not?
5. If you were to choose between Traditional (face-to-face) Learning and Flexible Learning Modality, which will you prefer? Why?
6. What can you recommend on the use of Flexible Learning Modality?
7. How can you say that you are motivated by the materials provided by your instructor/professor in Flexible Learning Modality?

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