

Teaching During the Pandemic: Lived Experiences of Teachers in the Tertiary Level

Abstract This qualitative research aimed to explore the experiences and obstacles encountered by educators when transitioning from in-person teaching to remote distance learning during the COVID-19 outbreak. Twenty tertiary education instructors from Central Visayas were interviewed and data were analyzed using a thematic analysis. The study revealed that the sudden shift to remote teaching highlighted teachers' critical role in shaping resilient students. Moreover, the study also identified opportunities for innovation and collaboration, as teachers experimented with new teaching methods. Therefore, teachers who were able to adapt flexibly to new teaching modalities and collaborate with colleagues were better able to navigate the challenges of remote teaching establishing a nurturing learning environment that addresses students' mental health requirements. It is hereby recommended Tertiary Education Institutions (TEIs) develop support initiatives that promote balance between work and personal life, foster collaboration, prioritize well-being, encourage feedback mechanisms, and invest in technology and infrastructure..

Keywords: *COVID-19 pandemic, lived experiences, phenomenology, student engagement, tertiary education*

Introduction

The pandemic led to a global health crisis, resulting in punitive measures like community quarantine and suspension of face-to-face instruction, affecting students and families, that followed World Health Organization's (WHO) declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic in February 2020 (Collado-Boira et al., 2020; Lemon, 2020). To limit the danger of virus transmission among students, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) issued COVID Advice No. 5, which called for the suspension of in-person classes, school-related activities, practical training, and internships.

Teachers grappled with psychological, emotional, and financial challenges due to remote learning, increased workloads, and uncertain health protocols, affecting their personal lives and work performance, ultimately affecting student education (Garcia & Santos, 2020; Johnson & Martinez, 2022; Smith, 2023).

Toquero (2020) stresses the importance of curriculum adaptability in academic institutions during the pandemic, emphasizing the need for humanity and unity in education. Remote classes in the Philippines caused stress, anxiety, and burnout among teachers, exacerbated by technology and resource disparities. Addressing these challenges, educational institutions must implement strategic initiatives and reinforce comprehensive support systems (Delos Santos, 2022; Lopez & Perez, 2023; Toquero, 2020;).

Investigating teachers' lived experience during the pandemic renders valuable insights into the challenges, adaptations, and repercussions of teaching in remote conditions. This helps policymakers, researchers, and stakeholders understand the pandemic's consequences and build successful responses for future crises.

Teachers' experiences can offer valuable insights into professional development and training needed for improving pedagogical skills in remote or hybrid learning environments, enabling tailored support and programs. The pandemic's experiences can inform the effectiveness of remote or hybrid teaching strategies, enabling educators to improve techniques and develop more effective approaches for future crises or remote learning.

The pandemic has significantly impacted teachers' mental health, work happiness, and overall well-being, necessitating the development of support mechanisms like counseling services and mental

health resources. Teachers' experiences can influence education policies, aiding legislators in understanding remote and hybrid education realities and creating evidence-based policies to address specific challenges instructors and students face.

In this light, this study explores the lived experiences of tertiary-level teachers during the pandemic, aiming to enhance educational planning in schools and universities.

Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic challenged schools worldwide to adopt inventive techniques to navigate this new landscape. Online education offers adaptability, tailored learning, and increased access for rural or low-income individuals. However, internet access, technology discrepancies, and the lack of gadgets and tools pose significant challenges to teachers. These teachers had to adapt their instructional strategies and approaches and learn to navigate digital and technological tools to create an interactive learning experience for students, and digital platforms provide a comprehensive range of learning tools.

Ensuring Student Engagement

Remote teaching necessitates teachers learning new techniques, such as designing and creating multimedia materials, collaborative exercises, and interactive conversations and engagement. Adapting new instructional approaches and using learning tools is necessary for student engagement and providing access to current knowledge (Jones et al., 2021; Garca-Sánchez et al., 2022).

The adaption of multimedia-based content, including films, animations, and quizzes, could encourage more student participation, improve comprehension, and foster engagement (Kay and LeSage, 2009). Collaborative technologies like virtual breakout rooms and discussion boards could also increase peer interaction.

Additionally, responding to inquiries and providing timely, constructive feedback to students promotes a sense of connection and support, while effective instructor-student communication increases student engagement and learning outcomes (Chou et al., 2019). To wit, a welcoming online learning environment, accessible course materials, and fostering a sense of community through icebreaker events and group projects are crucial for student participation and engagement in online learning (Rovai, 2022).

Addressing Equity and Access

The pandemic has also worsened inequities, issues on internet connectivity, device availability, and conducive home environments for equitable learning opportunities were the constant in terms of challenges faced by teachers making obvious the digital divide (Chen & deNoyelles, 2020; Martinez, 2021). Warschauer et al. (2004) shared that addressing the digital divide is crucial for fair access to online remote learning, requiring schools to provide the necessary resources to support the underserved students. Further, promoting equity in online teaching requires inclusive instructional techniques, accessible materials, and the Universal Design for Learning framework, to cater the diverse strengths and needs of all learners (Rose & Meyer, 2002). Also, promoting socio-emotional well-being in online teaching and learning is crucial to create a positive impact on student engagement and outcome (Murugesan et al., 2021).

Supporting Student Well-being

Providing assistance and resources to students, as well as fostering a friendly virtual classroom are top priorities of teachers during the pandemic in order to support students' emotional well-being to add offering emotional support, self-care exercises, and encouragement of open communication (Lee et al., 2021). As these teachers become accustomed to online platforms, approaches to learning may change, increased self-reliance, student satisfaction, and improvement of overall well-being. To note, regular communication and emotional support are crucial for student well-being, with positive teacher-student connections students' academic achievement and overall well-being may be achieved (Garcia et al., 2023). Additionally, fostering social connectedness and community is crucial for students well-being during the pandemic which is why educators should offer virtual social interaction opportunities and implement social-emotional learning (SEL) strategies in promoting empathy, emotional regulation, and positive relationship skills, and foster supportive virtual learning environment (Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016).

Assessment and Evaluation

The shift to remote learning, further, necessitated changes in assessment systems, requiring the adoption of project-based assignments and online evaluations, and emphasizing on formative assessments and timely feedback (Adams & Reddy, 2022; Brown et al., 2020). Various evaluation methodologies, including open-book exams, case studies, projects, and online conversations, are essential to learning and formative evaluations and technology-enabled methods enhance student participation and provide timely feedback (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). On the other hand, building academic integrity in online teaching and learning assessment requires emphasis on ethical behavior, and measures like time limitations to foster a culture of integrity and positively influences student behavior (Stowell & Bennett, 2010). Rubrics and explicit grading criteria are essential for fair evaluation in online teaching and learning promote consistency, understanding of expectations, and quality feedback (Brookhart, 2013).

Professional Development and Support

During the pandemic, virtual professional development programs improved teachers' job satisfaction and adaptability, while mental health assistance prevented burnout (Berberolu & Altun, 2021; Smith et al., 2022). Professional development and support are crucial for a resilient workforce. Virtual platforms and mental health programs help individuals navigate challenges.

Teachers adopt new educational methods and technologies through professional development programs, webinars, peer support networks, collaborative learning communities, and mentoring programs for effective online education (Mitchell, 2020; Lindblom-Ylänne et al., 2021). Video conferencing and online discussion boards adopted by teachers foster community and open lines of contact in virtual environments despite the challenges of maintaining relationships with students (Johnson & Anderson, 2022). Further, utilizing innovative teaching strategies, such as multimedia tools, simulations, virtual field trips, gamification, and flipped classrooms, could enhance remote instruction and make learning more enjoyable and meaningful (Kim et al., 2021; Martin & Zhang, 2021; Smith, 2020). Doyle et al. (2021) and Robertson et al. (2021) found that although teachers struggled with adapting new teaching methods, they also found opportunities for professional development, innovation, and teamwork.

Remote teaching fosters collaboration in online platforms and increases peer connection, group

work, problem-solving, and knowledge exchange through projects, breakout rooms, and discussion boards (Jones et al., 2021). On the other hand, the involvement of a guardian is crucial for student success in remote learning because teachers frequently communicate with families and facilitate virtual parent-teacher conferences, promoting collaboration and resolving issues (Lee et al., 2021).

Teachers also had to use reflective practices in choosing instructional strategies. They solicited feedback from students, co-workers, and administrators to ensure instructional effectiveness (Martinez, 2021). This theoretical viewpoint grasps the experiences of **teachers** during the pandemic more fully. More precisely, it can help clarify how they handle stress, embrace and apply technology, exercise self-determination, and get a community of practice support during this demanding period.

All things considered, teachers and students had to overcome these challenges and adopt new approaches. Creative strategies, commitment to student well-being, and innovative approaches negotiated the foreign terrain of remote and online learning influenced and informed by the knowledge gained guarantee teachers' resilience and adaptability in the face of the next crises.

Purposes of the Research

This phenomenological research aims to characterize the contextual meaning of tertiary-level teachers' lived experience during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Framework of the Study

The theory of communities of practice states that learning and professional development take place inside groups and are distinguished by common interests, practices, and goals (Smith, 2021). Teachers can gain from actively participating in communities of practice by sharing their best practices, collaborating with colleagues, and having necessary support and direction given their pandemic-related work setting.

On the other hand, Jack Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory holds that learning begins as results of confusing conundrums challenging one's preconceptions and assumptions. Mezirow emphasized on Cognitive dissonance as a result of the abrupt change to online teaching and learning brought on by the pandemic; teachers are forced to rapidly adjust to new circumstances and face educational system disparities. Teachers see the pandemic as a transforming event to foster resilience and creativity in teaching, this way they are able to maximize their instruction

On the sociocultural perspective of instruction and learning, the social and cultural context in which they occur are examined. Looking unto outside factors including technology, resources, and support helps teachers better understand their pandemic experience..

Additionally, education policies and guidelines developed by national and local education departments offer a framework for remote learning, student evaluation, safety procedures, and teachers' professional development chances. Labor laws, employment contracts, and collective bargaining agreements also provide legal protections for teachers to guarantee fair treatment, pay, and working conditions in these trying circumstances.

Finally, intellectual property rights pertaining to teachers' experiences and innovations during the pandemic must be taken into account to guarantee recognition and protection of teachers' efforts. Together with legal systems, theories including transformative learning and a sociocultural perspective help shape the study on teachers' experiences during the tertiary level pandemic

Methodology

Research Design

The study used the phenomenological approach to characterize the contextual meaning of tertiary-level teachers in Central Visayas during the epidemic. Using a thematic study, it embraced the Husserlian method to investigate the experiences of the subjects. Developed by philosopher Edmund Husserl, the Husserlian technique is a phenomenological study approach meant to help one understand subjective experiences and the structures of conscience. Under the idea of "bracketing," the researcher sets aside preconceptions and prejudices to concentrate just on the phenomenon as it shows itself in awareness. This process reduces outside influences and interpretations so enabling a direct investigation of the phenomenon in its whole.

Using methods like bracketing, the Husserlian technique explores subjective events free from preconceptions. Focusing on participants' views and lived experiences, researchers compile data by means of observations or interviews. Thematic analysis—that is, the identification of recurring themes or patterns across participants' experiences—then applies to this data. After that, the resultant themes are examined and interpreted to get understanding of the fundamental structures of consciousness and the interpretations of experiences.

Participants

Different participants—including teachers from many disciplines and institutions—were chosen using purposive sampling. The current research question and the available tools helped one ascertain the sample size. Included in this specific study were twenty tertiary education teachers. With the main tool of the research being the researchers themselves, the use of purposive sampling helped the identification and selection of participants who were tertiary-level teachers in Central Visayas (Polit & Beck, 2008).

Data collection

Online surveys, phone or video interviews, and focus groups were used to gather data with ten to 30 minutes per interview. Data collection was done in the second semester of AY 2020-2021. The data collection technique demonstrated adaptability and flexibility, allowing for consideration of participant preferences and availability. All sessions were audio-taped to provide thorough documentation of the interactive process. Each informant was the subject of many unstructured interviews to encourage rigor in this qualitative research. Additionally, person triangulation was used, which entails conducting in-depth interviews and monitoring the participants' actions, mannerisms, gestures, and other pertinent variables to increase the credibility of this study. Informed consent was obtained from participants after thoroughly explaining the interview process, which was audio-recorded to guarantee accurate data transcription. A coding system will be used to maintain participant anonymity and confidentiality, such as referring to participants as Respondent 1.

Data analysis

The gathered data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The data were analyzed to find recurrent themes and trends, such as the difficulties and opportunities teachers have encountered as they transitioned to remote teaching modalities. The thematic analysis identifies and analyzes recurring themes in qualitative data. It adopts the following steps, beginning with **familiarization**, familiarization involves reading and rereading the data to make the researcher become familiar with its content. The second is **coding**, which entails generating codes identifying essential information relevant to the research question. Third, **Generating Initial Themes**, where all the codes are examined, and the

collected data are extracted to identify patterns and sort them into broader themes. Then, **themes are reviewed**, which involves final checking and refining of the themes developed to ensure they accurately represent data. Themes are then defined and named to ensure that they tell a story. Finally, this last step involves writing up the results.

Ethical considerations

Throughout the study process, ethical factors such as gaining informed consent from participants, protecting anonymity, and ensuring that the research is done ethically and respectfully were considered.

Results and Discussion

This study explored the lived experiences of tertiary-level teachers during the pandemic and examined the impact on their personal and professional lives. The following themes were emerged:

Opportunities for innovation and collaboration

The pandemic gave educators chances to be creative and team player in fresh ways. Teachers have worked with colleagues across many disciplines and institutions and tested fresh teaching approaches and technologies. Among the stories are some that feature:

“The pandemic leads us to be more innovative and creative. I had to quickly adapt to the new remote teaching modality, which presented a steep learning curve for some. This required us to adjust their teaching materials, pedagogical approaches, and assessment methods” -P4

Based on their pandemic experiences, Dabbagh and Kitsantas (2020) investigated the possibilities and difficulties of remote teaching for tertiary-level teachers. Teachers who could quickly adjust to new teaching strategies and work with colleagues were found to be better able to negotiate the difficulties of remote learning. Emphasizing the need of invention, teamwork, and adaptability, the epidemic has spurred educational change. Emphasizing the teachers' critical role in forming resilient, empowered students who flourish in an always shifting environment, it has spurred a movement toward creative, cooperative, and flexible teaching approaches.

Teachers who embraced new teaching strategies, tools, and group projects during the epidemic will probably keep using them once the epidemic passes. This might result in including remote teaching techniques and digital tools into educational systems. Navigating the difficulties of remote learning will probably help teachers develop resilience and adaptation in their work. Regarding cooperation, the post-pandemic era could see ongoing attempts to link educators across sectors and institutions, so promoting knowledge exchange and new teaching projects.

Supporting Student Well-being During the Pandemic

Teachers in tertiary education during the epidemic also had personal experiences including stories bolstering student welfare. Given the effects of the epidemic on their personal life and academic progress, many teachers said they felt more accountable for the mental health and well-being of their students. Teachers felt more compelled, for instance, to provide emotional support to students experiencing the

effects of the epidemic—including anxiety, stress, and social isolation—according to Brydges and Sinclair (2021) study.

Examining how tertiary-level teachers might help student mental health during the epidemic, Branham and Gomez (2020) Teachers were found by the writers to be essential in establishing a welcoming and inclusive classroom as well as in giving poor students tools and referrals. Participants twelve and fourteen highlighted

“ Teachers were concerned about their health and safety as well as that of their students, especially those who were required to attend in-person classes” - P12

“Moreover, I feel a greater appreciation for my role of social connectedness and community building in promoting student well-being during the pandemic”- P14

A study by Sandars and O'Flynn (2021) found that teachers experienced an increased focus on supporting student well-being during the pandemic. Teachers reported spending more time checking in on their students, providing emotional support, and offering resources to help students cope with the challenges of remote learning. Another participant expressed that

“As teacher, we must support the mental health of the students. The webinar on mental health will also be considered” - P2

These narratives highlight the importance of supporting student well-being as an integral part of the teaching experience, especially during times of crisis. Institutions can support teachers by providing training and resources on mental health and well-being and promoting a culture of care and support for both teachers and students.

Increased workload and stress

Many teachers experienced an increased workload due to redesigning courses, developing new materials, and providing additional student support. This increased workload, combined with the uncertainty and anxiety caused by the pandemic, has led to heightened levels of stress and burnout. Participants 9 and 10 shared that.

“The pandemic blurred the boundaries between work and personal life, and many teachers reported difficulty in balancing their professional and personal responsibilities - Respondent 9

This often led to increased stress and burnout” - P10

Tertiary-level teachers had to quickly adapt to remote teaching modalities, such as online or hybrid classes, which required new skills and technologies. Adapting to remote teaching, there are challenges and opportunities for tertiary-level teachers, as expressed by respondent 2 and 1,

” I am also stressed because for me my work load increases. I need to learn more on technology so that I can collaborate with my students” - P2

This pandemic added our stress as teachers” - P1

One of the narratives that emerged from the lived experiences of teachers in tertiary education during the pandemic was an “*increasing workload*”. Many teachers reported feeling overwhelmed by the additional responsibilities of remote teaching, including developing new course materials, navigating new online platforms, and providing additional support to students. For example, a study by Connelly et al. (2021) found that teachers experienced an increased workload due to the need to develop and adapt teaching materials for remote instruction and the additional time required to support students who were struggling with the new learning environment.

Similarly, another study by Gleason and Zhang (2021) found that teachers in China experienced an increased workload due to the need to develop new course materials, attend online meetings, and provide additional support to students. Teachers reported feeling overwhelmed and stressed by the increased workload, which often led to feelings of burnout and decreased job satisfaction.

These stories underline the difficulties tertiary teachers experience during the epidemic and stress the need of institutions offering tools, support, and training to enable teachers negotiate this new classroom. Drawing on the experiences of teachers during the epidemic, the possibilities and difficulties of remote teaching for tertiary level educators present themselves. Adapting to new teaching modalities calls for flexibility, creativity, and teamwork, the writers underline (Dabbagh & Kitsantas 2020) personal learning environments, social media, and self-regulated learning.

The abrupt change to remote learning caused tertiary-level teachers great stress and anxiety, according to a 2021 qualitative study by Kourkouta and Papataniasiou. The more work teachers had to do and the requirement to change their approach, they said they felt overwhelmed. They also voiced worries on keeping student involvement and satisfying the needs of various students.

Difficulty maintaining student engagement

Maintaining student participation and interest in online learning environments has proved difficult for teachers. They have had to create fresh approaches to encourage student involvement and offer insightful comments.

The restrictions of online teaching tools and the absence of in-person student interaction reportedly challenged many teachers. For instance, a 2021 Hinojo-Lucena et al. study revealed that teachers in Spain struggled to get students into online classes, especially considering high degrees of screen fatigue and distractions. Participants fourteen and sixteen said,

“I feel the difficulty of maintaining student engagement in remote learning environments “- P 14

This is another challenge for us teachers because we need to have active engagement with our students. The training provided by the university on online pedagogy, offering technical support for online platforms, and promoting the use of active learning strategies to keep students engaged and motivated have a great help for us teachers- P16

Drawing on the experiences of tertiary-level teachers during the epidemic, Lombardi and Oblinger (2020) looked at ways for encouraging student participation in online learning. Teachers who gave top

priority to building a feeling of community and giving chances for interaction and feedback turned out to be more effective in involving their students into the online learning environment.

Teachers in the United States struggled greatly to keep student involvement during the epidemic, according a 2021 Darby et al. study. Teachers said they found it challenging to modify their approach to the online classroom and build student community and connection. Teachers also voiced worries on the possible long-term effects of lower student involvement on learning results and student success.

Teaching tertiary-level students during the epidemic has presented varied and difficult experiences with chances for development and creativity as well as challenges. Research studies and publications covering these events have given insightful analysis of the changing scene of higher education under COVID-19. The study highlights both the possibilities for development and innovation as well as the difficulties faced by teachers in tertiary education during the epidemic, so illuminating their varied and complex experiences. The results have ramifications for tertiary education institutions since they imply the need of support and tools to enable teachers to effectively cooperate with colleagues and adjust to the new teaching modalities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The pandemic has challenged the way our educational system, especially tertiary education teachers to adapt to new ways of teaching and learning as well as create and innovate instructional methods and approaches to ensure maximum learning despite the digital divide. It also revealed how resilient teachers could be despite the circumstances faced as evident in how teachers addressed stresses and heavy workload as well as the lack of the teaching tools. These teachers were still able to create a conducive learning environment that meets students' mental health needs.

Recommendation

Institutions may design programs that address the well-being of teachers, provide continuous professional development chances, promote work-life balance, foster collaborative environments, prioritize student well-being, encourage feedback and communication, and invest in technology and infrastructure to help teachers in education—especially post-pandemic.

Implications to Post -Pandemic

Lessons learnt during the epidemic help shape the future if teaching and learning. Models of hybrid learning may focus on teacher and student well-being, technology integration, group learning communities, adaptable policies and practices as a trend in teaching and future. Institutions are challenged to make teaching and learning interesting and encouraging in hybrid world.

Limitation of the Study

The results of the study should be underlined as perhaps not easily applicable to other geographical areas or educational levels. Depending on the researchers' interpretations, the approach used in the study may bring bias. Besides, the sample size of the study was rather small. Furthermore, depending just on online surveys, interviews, and focus groups might cause one to miss significant information sources. At last, the highly subjective use of the Husserlian technique for thematic analysis may profit from further validation methods.

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Appendix 1: Thematic Table

Codes and Sample Verbatim Responses	Categories	Themes	Description of the Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “The pandemic leads us to be more innovative and creative. I had to quickly adapt to the new remote teaching modality, which presented a steep learning curve for some. This required us to adjust their teaching materials, pedagogical approaches, and assessment methods” 	Opportunities	Opportunities for innovation and collaboration	The pandemic has driven innovation and collaboration in teaching, requiring rapid adaptation to new remote learning modalities.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “ Teachers were concerned about their own health and safety as well as that of their students, especially those who were required to attend in-person classes “Moreover, I feel a greater appreciation for my role of social connectedness and community building in promoting student well-being during the pandemic” “As teacher, we must support the mental health of the students. The webinar on mental health will also be considered 	Well-being	Supporting Student Well-being During the Pandemic	Teachers were concerned about their own and their students' health and safety while also recognizing the importance of their role in fostering social connectedness and supporting student well-being during the pandemic.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “The pandemic blurred the boundaries between work and personal life, and many teachers reported difficulty in balancing their professional and personal responsibilities. This often led to increased stress and burnout” ” I am also stressed because for me my work load increases. I need to learn more on technology so that I can collaborate with my students. This pandemic added our stress as teachers” 	Stress	Increased workload and stress	The pandemic increased teachers' workloads and stress levels, necessitating new technological skills and balancing professional and personal responsibilities.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “I feel the difficulty of maintaining student engagement in remote learning environments 	Engagement	Difficulty maintaining student engagement	Maintaining student engagement in remote learning environments has been particularly challenging.