




Research Article

From stress to success: Exploring how Filipino students cope with remote learning amid COVID-19 pandemic

Erwin Rotas¹ and Michael Cahapay²

¹Department of Education, General Santos City, Philippines; ²College of Education, Mindanao State University, Philippines

Correspondences should be addressed to Erwin Rotas  erwinemperadorotas@gmail.com

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Remote learning, especially in developing countries where resources are a real problem, poses overwhelming stress among the students amid the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. This article aims to explore how students cope with remote learning amid the COVID-19 pandemic. It entailed a qualitative research design following a descriptive approach. The participants were 32 purposively sampled Filipino university students. An online survey method was employed to gather the needed information which was then subjected to content analysis. It emerged that the students employ the following coping strategies: looking for good space and time; borrowing learning resources; seeking support from peers; approaching the teachers; practicing time management; doing learning tasks ahead; extending the time for learning tasks; diverting attention; regulating the self; taking extra jobs; crying; and praying. This paper provides evidence as regards the contextual coping strategies of students in trying to succeed in remote learning amid a global crisis. The conclusions and recommendations are offered at the end of the paper.

Keywords: Coping strategies, remote learning, COVID-19 pandemic, Philippines

I. Introduction

The widespread of COVID-19 in many countries around the world was declared as a public health emergency of global concern in January 2020 (Mahase, 2020) and troubled almost all areas of human life. Governments issued mandatory border lockdowns and health authorities imposed strict health protocols and regulations to help prevent the spread of the virus. Many businesses had to close and travels had been allowed for very essential transactions only. People of all walks of life had to deal with anxiety, stress, and uncertainty. Measures to contain the virus enforce shutting down of buildings including basic education, colleges and universities, and skills development establishments. As a response, learning institutions particularly tertiary education rapidly transitions to remote classes.

Remote learning in this context should not be compared to the traditional distance education practiced before the crisis but can be best described as emergency remote education (ERE) (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). It is still a branch of distance education as a result of an unprecedented health emergency. Tertiary education institutions (TEIs) have ventured into many forms of ERE to sustain education efforts. This includes mobile learning, online learning, distance education, blended learning, and homeschooling. In this context, it is highlighted that ERE should not substitute traditional distance education nor change the conventional on-campus learning system (Hodges et al., 2020). While successful distance learning programs rely on well-built ICT, telecommunications, and a well-organized faculty support system (Aboagye et al., 2020), TEIs strive to consistently provide necessary instructional support to students using available technologies and learning resources.

Globally, the pandemic has extremely affected 1.58 billion children and youth (UN, 2020). As of the middle of this year, countries observed a 'flattening of the curve' scenario; however, it is reported that over one billion learners are still affected by the situation (United Nations, 2020). This number accounts for 61 percent of the world's overall enrollment. Remote classes are happening for almost several months now and the current situation still exacerbates pre-existing educational disparities among students. Hence, the ongoing health crisis has resulted in interruptions in education (Bozkurt et al., 2020).

Set in a developing country, tertiary institutions in the Philippines are observably unprepared for the sudden migration of education in the middle of the ongoing crisis and the remote learning system seems chaotic. Looking at the statistics, it is reported that almost 3.5 million Filipino students enrolled in tertiary level

institutions are roughly affected by the pandemic (Joaquin, Biana & Dacela, 2020). It also revealed the digital divide among Filipino students who are already under remote learning right now. Apart from the other challenges that they need to overcome before the crisis on a face to face learning set-up, students now even have to face difficulties associated with remote learning (Simbulan, 2020). As a result, students suffer from a lot of stressful events due to the many responsibilities they have to handle every day. Looking at the larger picture, learning is complicated, and students are in the middle of a social disaster.

Despite overwhelming stress and difficulties as reported in recent studies (e.g. see Rotas & Cahapay, 2020; Bozkurt et al., 2020; Baticulon et al., 2020), students still find silver linings out from the challenges they encounter in the practice of remote learning. Locally, for instance, Custodio, a freshman Filipino student who only relies on her tiny 5-inch screen cellphone to participate in their remote classes, copes with the challenge by downloading the lesson plans on her phone and re-writing them on a paper for easy reading (Santos, 2020). Furthermore, in a local study (Baloran, 2020), Filipino students surveyed used a combination of personal coping strategies during this pandemic. It includes connecting with friends and family to relieve stress, talking and motivating oneself, and diverting attention to other things at home to stay away from the stress caused by COVID-19. Despite the negativities, students still find themselves surviving in a remote learning set-up through coping mechanisms to manage their stress.

Considering education as a global common good (United Nations, 2020), students continually strive to survive and demonstrate positive actions, responses, and outlook to surpass the everyday struggles associated with remote learning. While the action is the antidote to despair; coping strategies is also the antidote to stress and challenges. Conceptually, Chowdhury (2020) defined coping strategy as a set of adaptive tools administered to proactively avoid burnout. Berjot and Gillet (2011) further contended that coping is a response behavior used by an individual to protect himself or herself from a painful stimulus that may provoke his or her stress and anxiety. In this study, coping is a strategy or mechanism employed by the students to successfully manage stressful events and situations pertained to remote learning amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Numerous studies have already been conducted to document the coping strategies of students in a remote learning setting (e.g. Baloran, 2020; Croft, Dalton & Grant, 2010; Gong, 2020; Green, Burrow & Carvalho, 2020; Guo et al., 2020; Kimotho, 2018; Klapproth et al., 2020; Kwon, 2010; Matswetu et al., 2020; Nyatsanza & Mtezo, 2013; Osafo, 2017; Petronzi & Petronzi, 2020). Recent studies in the Philippine context had also been conducted to report how university students enrolled under various disciplines cope with stress, but in a face-to-face learning setting (e.g. Austria-Cruz, 2019; Mazo, 2015; Nuas et al., 2015; Vizconde, 2012; Yazon, Manai & Tesoro, 2017;). The current research descriptively addresses the gap on how students cope with remote learning within the Philippine context that is plagued by structural constraints and exacerbated by the current global crisis. This paper provides researchers and educators a qualitative glimpse into the coping strategies employed by students in a developing country amid this time of global uncertainty.

Thus, the goal of this study is to explore how Filipino students cope with remote learning amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

This paper employed a qualitative research design following a descriptive approach. A qualitative research design involves a discovery process that enables the researcher to develop details. It does not test a hypothesis, but rather explore a given phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). One of the approaches under qualitative research design is the descriptive approach. It is an approach that describes the current status of a phenomenon without intent to manipulate (Mertler, 2009). Thus, based on this information, a qualitative research design following a descriptive approach is considered appropriate for this study which has the primary purpose to explore how Filipino students cope with the remote learning in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.2. Participants

A total of 32 Filipino students served as respondents of this study. They were chosen through purposive and convenient sampling techniques. They are currently enrolled in a program in a state university, thus have considerable experience in remote learning. They were further selected based on their ability to furnish the

needed data and considering their availability at the time of the data gathering. This sample does not represent the population of the students, but it is considered adequate to demonstrate the qualitative purpose of this study to saturate all possible coping strategies that students employ in remote learning.

2.3. Instrument

The instrument used to collect the data for this study was a survey questionnaire. Pressed by the current restriction, the researchers developed the survey questionnaire through Google Form to be answered online. It consisted of open questions designed to gather responses about how the students cope with the remote learning amid the current situation. The researchers tailored the questions based on the interest of the study. They were content validated by a professor and two college students to ensure their intelligibility, appropriateness, and relevance.

2.4. Procedure

The research process was done by initially securing the consent of the target respondents. The researchers explained the purpose of the study. Considering the current situation, it was emphasized that their participation is voluntary and follows the principle of anonymity. It was also articulated that no advantage nor harm is accrued from participating in the study. The link to the electronic survey questionnaire was posted in the group chat of the class. The students answered the electronic survey questionnaire and then submitted it. The data were downloaded, organized, and subjected to analysis.

2.5. Data Analysis

The gathered data were specifically subjected to content analysis. Jupp (2006) defined content analysis as a technique used to analyze data obtained from a range of practices presented in different forms such as written words and images. The researchers initially downloaded the transcript of all the responses of the participants. The preliminary inspection of the data made possible the identification of the codes. These codes were repetitively examined based on their similarities and differences until categories were generated. The researchers iteratively returned to the original transcript to review the codes and proposed categories.

3. Results

This paper aimed to explore how Filipino students cope with remote learning in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. This section presents the results as follows. The result is presented in Table I.

Table I

Coping Strategies of Students in Remote Learning amid COVID-19 Pandemic

Selected Codes	Category
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I walk one and half hour to another barangay or village just to have a stable internet access.</i> • <i>Looking for a space where I could find better internet connection. Like for example I will be studying outside the house.</i> • <i>Doing task and submitting it midnight because it is the only time that we have a fast internet connection.</i> 	Looking for good space and time
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Whenever the requirements need applications not in my phone, I borrow gadgets from my brother.</i> • <i>I borrow computer just to finish task when smartphone is not enough to complete the task.</i> 	Borrowing learning resources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I ask my classmates whenever I do not understand some of the lessons or instructions.</i> • <i>Whenever I am not updated, I ask one of my classmates or just to check the site when there are activities.</i> • <i>We discuss online to get more ideas and help each other so that no one will be left behind.</i> 	Seeking support from peers

Table 1 continued

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have no control over internet connection, so I message my teachers for my concerns. • I ask questions to the teachers if I am having difficulties in the class requirements. • I humbly approach my teachers with my concerns and luckily, they also give considerations. 	Approaching the teachers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have checklist of all the things that I must do in order to organize all the things that I should do. • I list all my tasks in the paper for me to see them, so I can choose which to accomplish first. • I answer my worksheets in night because I do have lot of works to do in morning. 	Practicing time management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I download ahead of time in Google all the PDF files that I need for my lessons. • I submit the requirements earlier so the teachers could view it earlier and ask for another one if ever there is wrong. 	Doing learning tasks ahead
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I stay up all night to understand the lessons. I read again and again the materials. • I spend some extra hours in order to be able to comply all my requirements on the set deadline. 	Extending time for learning tasks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have a time with my family in order to lessen the stress that I experience from remote learning. • I do things that can make me happy like planting, watering our plants, playing with our dogs, watching movies. • I take a short break for at least fifteen minutes from time to time when I am too tired. 	Diverting attention
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I keep this piece of advice in my mind that no subject is difficult to handle if I want to learn. • I train myself to regain focus every time I seem to lose one so that I will not be left behind. • When I feel down, I am trying hard to convince my mind to be positive at all times. 	Regulating the self
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I accept tutorials with my younger cousins in exchange of the internet load that I needed. • I use my extra time to sell barbecue just to earn money for the budget of my internet load. 	Taking extra jobs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Then there are times when I cry because I do not know which activity to finish and submit first. • I breakdown and cry. I take a break this way but then I go back to my paper works after a while. 	Crying
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Praying that my teachers would understand whatever are my unintended shortcomings. • I always pray to God and just keep that faith that everything will be fine soonest. 	Praying

Category 1: Looking for good space and time. Since internet connection is highly needed in remote learning but is unstable, most students cope up by trying to find a good space and time to connect. They look for a spot within their homes or even go to another village (“I walk one and half hour to another barangay or village” -Student 32). The internet connection is also dependent on time (“Doing task and submitting it midnight because it is the only time that we have a fast internet connection” -Student 30).

Category 2: Borrowing learning resources. The students also disclosed that, when their gadgets are not enough to perform their tasks in remote learning, they borrow learning resources. This happens when they need certain applications (“Whenever the requirements need applications not in my phone, I borrow gadgets from my brother” -Student 19) or need a computer rather than their phone (“I borrow computer just to finish task when smartphone is not enough to complete the task” -Student 31).

Category 3: Seeking support from peers. The support system that students get from their peers is also an important coping strategy in remote learning. It serves to augment their understanding of the lesson ("I ask my classmates whenever I do not understand some of the lessons or instructions" -Student 18) and for updating purposes ("Whenever I am not updated, I ask one of my classmates or just to check the site when there are activities" -Student 31).

Category 4: Approaching the teachers. Another coping strategy that students use when remote learning becomes too difficult for them is directly approaching their teachers. They turn to this strategy especially when they have internet connection concerns ("I have no control over internet connection, so I message my teachers for my submission concerns" -Student 27) or when they have queries about the requirements ("I ask questions to the teachers if I am having difficulties in the class requirements" -Student 24).

Category 5: Practicing time management. Relative to extending study time and doing tasks in advance, the students have specific time management practices. They organize their tasks ("I have checklist of all the things that I must do in order to organize all the things that I should do" -Student 02). They schedule remote learning tasks and other works ("I answer my worksheets in night because I do have lot of works to do in morning" -Student 17).

Category 6: Doing learning tasks ahead. Furthermore, some students make sure they comply with remote learning tasks by finishing them in advance as a coping strategy. They download materials ahead ("I download ahead of time in Google all the PDF files that I need for my lessons" -Student 21) and finish tasks earlier ("I submit the requirements earlier so the teachers could view it earlier and ask for another one if ever there is wrong" -Student 04).

Category 7: Extending the time for learning tasks. Other students extend study time to cope up with remote learning. They use this extended time to relearn lessons ("I stay up all night to understand the lessons. I read again and again the materials" -Student 14) and finish their requirements ("I spend some extra hours in order to be able to comply all my requirements on the set deadline" -Student 09).

Category 8: Diverting attention. The students likewise divert their attention away from remote learning as a coping mechanism. They turn their time with people within their close circle ("I have a time with my family in order to lessen the stress that I experience from remote learning" -Student 18). They also engage in leisure activities ("I do things that can make me happy like planting, watering our plants, playing with our dogs, watching movies" -Student 02).

Category 9: Regulating the self. Moreover, the students employ self-regulating strategies as a way to cope up in remote learning. They motivate themselves for the sake of learning ("I keep this piece of advice in my mind that no subject is difficult to handle if I want to learn" -Student 05). They condition themselves to stay positive ("When I feel down, I am trying hard to convince my mind to be positive at all times" -Student 13).

Category 10: Taking extra jobs. The students financially cope up in remote learning by taking extra jobs mostly to cover their internet load expenses. They do teaching-related jobs ("I accept tutorials with my younger cousins in exchange of the internet load that I needed" -Student 17) or small business ("I use my extra time to sell barbecue just to earn money for the budget of my internet load" -Student 31).

Category 11: Crying. A coping strategy that also seems to help students cope up in remote learning is crying. They resort to this when they are overwhelmed by many tasks ("Then there are times when I cry because I do not know which activity to finish and submit first" -Student 11). However, they try to bounce back after it ("I breakdown and cry. I take a break this way but then I go back to my paper works after a while" -Student 07).

Category 12: Praying. Lastly, the students expressed that they turn to pray to cope up in remote learning. They hope that they will be considered by their teachers ("Praying that my teachers would understand whatever are my unintended shortcomings" -Student 04). They also ask for better conditions ("I always pray to God and just keep that faith that everything will be fine soonest" -Student 24).

4. Discussion

Remote learning in the middle of the COVID-19 crisis poses hurdles to students but also drives them to survive despite the number of challenging tasks they need to experience every day. Thus, this study aimed to describe how Filipino students cope with challenges related to remote learning in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. The emerging themes enumerated above are being discussed in the following paragraphs.

Since a stable internet connection is highly needed but a challenge in remote learning, the students, especially those from marginalized families, cope by looking for good space and time. Cook (2019) suggested that finding a better spot for the wireless router will help gain a higher broadband connection. It is interesting to observe that using WiFi at night can also avoid traffic in the WiFi spectrum because fewer people are competing for air space. This is in line with the results of the study by Matswetu et al. (2020) where students who do not have an internet connection look for every possible alternative to pass their requirements.

Students also cope with remote learning by borrowing learning resources. Since course tasks require laptops or computers, a common coping strategy is asking for help from the family and other relatives who can immediately assist (Osafo, 2017). Seeking support from peers is another coping strategy. Gore et al., (2014) maintain that students who experience stress under a remote learning program often find social support from their friends. This is congruent to the research of Bosio (2020) that students create strong relationships. It helps students overcome the feeling of isolation (Wang, 2005).

Approaching the teachers is also one way of coping with bulks of lesson activities. This may be attributed to a successful online or telephone assistance system as part of institutions' e-learning initiatives aimed at providing venues for students to peer-tutor and communicate with their teachers regarding concerns in subjects (Talbot, 2007). In this case, virtual mentoring has also become a basic education service used as a way of providing advice and guidance to students who are new to remote learning (Barrett & Lally, 2000).

With regards to accomplishing lesson activities, the students cope by practicing time management, doing learning tasks ahead, and extending the time for learning tasks. These three coping strategies are interconnected because time management makes time flexible for other tasks. Joubert (2020) suggested that students need to make a schedule of the tasks they need to accomplish to improve their time management skills including doing lesson activities ahead and extending the time for learning tasks. She emphasized that students need to commit to making their online coursework a part of their weekly routine.

Though remote learning poses serious educational problems, students still cope by diverting their attention to leisure activities and merrymaking. This coping strategy is correspondingly practiced by students who feel stressed in the study of Shamsuddin et al., (2013). Students were more likely to use recreational skill approaches to cope with stressful events rather than through physiological or socio-psychological means. This type of students is usually taking things slowly, organized, and can easily handle themselves when problems break out (Esiahdonkoh, 2014).

Meanwhile, students beginning remote learning are more likely to feel uneasy about higher expectations of teachers. However, they escape from this pressure and cope by regulating themselves. These students must have cultivated a culture of identity management. Brekhus (2003) supports that identity management is a crucial strategy for individuals to adapt, redefine, or reshape themselves according to their current situation or environment. In other words, they are flexible in regulating themselves, and less they are likely to feel burdened.

Taking extra jobs was also sought as another coping mechanism. This is consistent with a recent study conducted by Matswetu et al. (2020) where students struggle to raise money, so they have to buy and sell goods. The students likewise cope through praying and crying. Considering the sudden migration to remote learning, students also undergo emotional adjustments. This coping strategy is similarly practiced by students in the study of Baloran (2020). When they are overwhelmed with many tasks, students resort to praying and vent out emotions by screaming to the point of crying.

5. Conclusion

Remote learning amid a crisis may present tremendous stress to students. This study aimed to qualitatively explore how Filipino college students cope with remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. It can be concluded from the results that students employ several coping strategies in their attempt to succeed in remote learning amid the current crisis. The categories of coping strategies that emerged are: looking for good space and time; borrowing learning resources, seeking support from peers; approaching the teachers; practicing time management; doing learning tasks ahead; extending the time for learning tasks; diverting attention; regulating the self; taking extra jobs; crying; and praying. This paper presents a contextual conclusion as far as particular coping strategies of college students in remote learning during a global crisis are concerned.

Based on this conclusion, it is recommended that formal mechanisms at the institutional level should be placed. For example, the government should address perennial problems with internet connectivity. A drive to provide identified students with phones or computers should also be coordinated as a partnership with concerned private sectors. Moreover, the university should broaden their student support services as far as psychological services are concerned. These services may be integrated at the university, college, department, and course levels. The instructional requirements, e.g. schedule of submissions and number of activities, should also be adjusted by the teachers when designing the instruction. This action will help students as they adjust to the remote delivery approach while learning the modular content at the same time.

As this work focused on qualitatively exploring and describing the coping strategies of selected participants in a particular environment and circumstance, the conclusions can only be applied within the context of the research. Restricted within a small sample of college students, the result is not intended to generalize about the coping strategies of the population of all college students. Thus, based on this constraint, it is suggested that future researchers should conduct an extension for the quantitative component through surveys and involving a larger sample in the different levels of education. This approach will provide a broader perspective as regards the coping strategies employed by the students amid challenging times of the COVID-19 crisis.

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