

Offline Learning Experiences: Stories of Challenges and Success in a Community College

By

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Abstract

The present study examined the implementation of offline learning through modular and online asynchronous instruction at a local polytechnic college. The study employed a qualitative phenomenological design, which focused on the lived experiences of the faculty and students as they engaged in offline learning. Thematic analysis was used as the researchers drew upon interviews conducted virtually with the faculty and students of a local polytechnic college. Separate questionnaires were prepared for the faculty and students. Data analysis underwent two phases: first, through the independent analysis of each researcher, followed by comparative analysis of the findings.

The data gathered were categorized into four themes, namely institutional practices of the local polytechnic college, faculty and students' perceptions of learning delivery, significant stories, as well as challenges and issues faced by the faculty and students during the implementation of offline learning. Major similarities among the lived experiences of the interviewees and their recommendations for each category are reported. Two frameworks emerged based on the results of the study. These frameworks may be benchmarked and applied in future adoptions of offline learning, for both faculty and students. In addition, these may be studied further to develop a more effective and efficient implementation of offline learning.

Keywords: polytechnic college, modular instruction, asynchronous class.

1. Background

Entrepreneurship Flexible learning of various types had been adopted as alternatives to traditional face-to-face classroom instruction. Two such types of flexible learning are asynchronous and modular, otherwise known as *offline learning*, the main focus of the present study.

Asynchronous learning is conducted online through a learner management system; though there is no real-time interaction between instructors and learners, there are platforms for communication which they use to initiate or respond to messages at their own pace and time.

As for modular learning, learners are provided with modules composed of course content, assignments, and instructions. The faculty are there for learners to consult if clarifications need to be made. They are also expected to give feedback regarding their assessment of learners' outputs.

For university-level learners, it was found that modular learning is more conducive seeing as they have control over the pace and style with which they learn (Sadiq & Zamir, 2014). Motivation and interest for learners who participate in modular learning mostly come from receiving feedback.

The same could be said about asynchronous learners; when instructors provide sufficient scaffolding, asynchronous learners become more self-efficacious and persistent (Jena & Gupta, 2019) especially when they are assigned activities such as online collaborative writing, which leads to greater motivation (Bailey et al., 2021).

2. Rationale

It had previously been established that students from private and public schools differ in terms of their learning behaviors. In particular, the length of time and the amount of support from parents tend to be lower for students from public schools, and older learners prefer to spend less time learning with instruction or studying online (Tran, 2020).

Apart from older learners' preference for less instruction and screen time, their satisfaction with asynchronous learning can be attributed to the metacognitive strategies they employ in studying, the time they spend and the environment they are in, as well as the amount of peer learning that takes place (Choi, 2016). These factors make asynchronous learning more demanding (D'aba, 2014) seeing as it requires connectedness, feedback, fast response time, and content that is relevant and accessible.

However, in determining how effective asynchronous learning is, the need for more varied assessments is emphasized (Karal & Cebi, 2012), preferably a balanced combination of quantitative, fixed answer assessments and qualitative, subjective assessments.

The same could be said about modular learning. In consideration of the similarities in the way these two types of flexible learning were implemented, the present study took a closer look at the outcomes that students of a local polytechnic college achieved over the course of an academic year, as well as the practices that led to those outcomes.

3. Objective

One of the objectives of the adoption of modular learning would be to see a significant dip in dropout rates. Mazrekaj & de Witte (2019) found that modular learning lowered dropout rates by 2.5 percentage points. Moreover, it led to gainful employment and even higher earnings for students who participated in modular learning.

This may be the case because of the development of active learning, critical thinking and problem solving skills among modular learners (Pastushkova et al., 2019). Similarly, Ing (2020) found that higher level thinking skills could also be found among asynchronous learners who proactively participate in message board discussions.

Measuring how much learners actually improve can be monitored through learning

analytics (Cerro-Martinez et al., 2020), particularly when the data and metrics are instructor-defined. Instructors are also tasked with commenting on students' learning processes and giving feedback accordingly.

The present study's objective was to gather and analyze data on an institution-wide level at a local polytechnic college regarding the practices in offline learning and uncover any frameworks that may be developed as a result of it.

4. Contribution

With the present study, not only were the best practices and points for improvement in offline learning made apparent, but it may also serve as a guide as to how offline learning can be made more conducive moving forward, while taking into account the insights and needs of both faculty and learners.

It is akin to Ozturk (2021) which delved into the asynchronous online learning environment and revealed the challenges in its implementation, such as social isolation due to lack of face-to-face interaction, and suggestions such as allocating more opportunities for interaction and using alternative evaluation methods.

5. Research questions

That being said, the present study attempted to answer the following questions:

1. What were the practices of the institution in handling asynchronous and modular classes as experienced by the teachers and learners?
2. How did the teachers and learners perceive the learning delivery set by the institution?
3. What significant stories could be shared by the teachers and learners during the asynchronous and modular classes?
4. How did the teachers and learners address the challenges and issues brought about by the asynchronous and modular classes?
5. What framework could be developed based on the conscious experiences of both teachers and learners?

6. Research design

The present study used a qualitative phenomenological design, which focused on the analysis of conscious and immediate lived experiences of the faculty and learners of a local polytechnic college as they engaged in offline learning.

It is akin to Delgado & Arellano (2021), which phenomenologically studied the lived experiences of graduate students who adopted flexible learning in their classes.

7. Participants

The participants of the present study included 20 faculty members and 20 learners from

the local polytechnic college, chosen via non-probability sampling.

The faculty members were chosen based on whether they had carried out classes through flexible learning during Academic Year 2020-2021. Among the learners interviewed for the present study, 25% of the participants were high performing learners earning grades of 1.5 or higher, 25% received grades below 2.5, and 50% received grades between 1.75 and 2.25. These conditions were met by consulting the program directors who are in charge of the faculty and students interviewed.

8. Instruments

Two (2) sets of interview questions were prepared via Google Forms, which served as the framework for the interviews conducted via Google Meet. These questions were categorized into separate sections, based on which research question was intended to be answered, namely: Institutional Practices, Perceptions of Learning Delivery, Significant Stories, and Challenges and Issues.

9. Data gathering procedure

The researchers were each assigned faculty members and learners to interview via Google Meet. The learners must not be students of the researcher assigned to interview them to avoid bias. Each interview was recorded, with the interviewees' answers transcribed onto the Google Form for ease in organizing and categorizing the content.

The interviewed faculty members came from the Institute of Arts and Sciences, and were assigned to teach general education courses to students from the Institute of Information Technology and Innovation, Institute of Business and Accountancy, Institute of Hospitality and Tourism Management, and Institute of Education. The interviewed students were recommended by their program directors upon the request of the researchers.

10. Analysis procedure

Thematic analysis was used to process the data. Two phases were conducted in the analysis procedure: first, the researchers independently categorized the data gathered from the faculty and students based on similar answers. In the second phase, the researchers compared findings and coherently consolidated them into the categories identified in the research instrument, namely Institutional Practices, Perceptions of Learning Delivery, Significant Stories, and Challenges and Issues. Each category was given descriptions based on the data provided by the faculty and students.

Relationships among the findings were explored and identified, so that a clear framework for how offline learning was conducted and experienced by the faculty and students could emerge.

11. Institutional Practices

Eight considerations emerged as researchers analyzed the institutional practices of the local college, namely: communication, collaboration, learning style, teaching style, feedback, time allotment, expectation setting, and references.

It was discovered that communication relies heavily on the “professor factor” – that is, how proactive and consistent a faculty member is in reaching out and engaging with students, and what the faculty member’s technical profile is. This mirrors the findings of D’aba (2014) in which feedback and quick responses, among other things, were identified as the requirements for asynchronous learning.

However, both faculty and students identified selective barriers that hinder effective communication in offline learning. For instance, some faculty would say that students are the ones who are unresponsive and difficult to reach throughout the semester, only to appear again towards the end of the semester to ask about their current class standing and the requirements that need to be complied in order to pass. In other cases, students would say that their professors do not respond to their inquiries and messages.

The aforementioned communication barriers were not necessarily brought about by technological issues, seeing as both faculty and students acknowledged that they have access to at least one gadget and at least one source of Internet connection or mobile data to participate in the teaching-learning process.

The communication barriers were more likely due to the boundaries set by faculty and students for the time they would spend responding to work-related or school-related messages. There were faculty members who were adamant about not entertaining messages outside work hours as part of their class policies. To a certain extent, the technical profile of the faculty may also be a factor, particularly those who were only recently introduced to technologically mediated communication. Some students’ messages may have been filtered out of their main inbox, and could not be retrieved unless they were taught how.

As for collaboration among students, interactive class activities and learning delivery were maintained despite adopting the offline learning modality. Faculty members made it a point to assign group work tasks such as research or multimedia outputs, while high performing students reported that they conducted peer-tutoring especially with the less privileged students in their class. Bailey et al. (2021) associated online collaborative writing with greater motivation, which could also be seen among the students interviewed for the present study.

The learning style that the students adopted for this modality was primarily independent learning. Although there were high performing students who engaged in peer-tutoring with others in their class, the average students responded that they would read the modules provided by the faculty, access the references cited by the faculty, and did their own research about the topics in their syllabi throughout the semester. Independent learning was also encouraged by the faculty due to the limited opportunities available, if any, for teacher-centered learning under the offline learning modality.

As for the teaching style adopted by the faculty, they reported relying heavily on Google Classroom to disseminate self-paced materials and activities to the students, though some also produced hard copies of modules and activities for the sake of students who did not have access to gadgets or stable Internet connection.

When applicable, some faculty members who are equipped with greater technical ability applied game-based learning and assessment for the students through websites and applications meant to facilitate learning and student assessment in engaging and interactive ways. This meets the need identified by Karal & Cebi (2012) for more varied assessments.

However, the faculty members gave a disclaimer that game-based learning and assessment was only conducive for students with access to gadgets and strong Internet connection.

The time allotment implemented by the local college was nine weeks per course, because the semester was divided into two sets – Set A allotted the first nine weeks for half of the courses enrolled by a class, and Set B started in the latter nine weeks of the semester for the other remaining courses enrolled by a class. However, both the faculty and students who were interviewed agreed that the ideal length of time for offline learning, particularly for modular classes, would be an entire semester, and not just for nine weeks or half a semester.

The division of courses into sets of half-semester schedules was not always applicable, though; the faculty members interviewed for the present study all handled general education courses. Students indicated that the specialized courses for their respective programs, particularly the research-writing, on-the-job-training, and skill-based courses ran for the duration of the entire semester.

Faculty and students were also asked about setting expectations at the start of the semester, particularly during the first day orientation of the class. Both faculty and students expressed that they did meet for first day orientation, and that the entirety of the course typically followed the original design that was initially discussed. In other words, most courses were compliant with the prescribed offline learning modality.

As for the references used in class, all students interviewed relied on online sources, which they claim taught them how to be more discerning between reliable and unreliable references. There were faculty who suggested supplemental reference materials for the students, often as part of the self-paced modules they produced. However, the resources available at the college library were not mentioned by the faculty in the references they suggested to the students.

12. Perceptions of Learning Delivery

Faculty and students were asked what their immediate impressions of the offline learning modality were, how much school support they perceived they had, and what innovations or changes they could recommend to further improve the implementation of offline learning.

At first, students had an adaptive response to the sudden shift to offline learning. Some expressed relief that at the very least, they would not have to stop studying despite the restrictions on face-to-face classes. Some were excited for the new modality, but had questions since they could not yet imagine how it would be implemented from the initial announcement alone. Would they have to sit through three-hour lectures online, just like they did in face-to-face classes? How would the local college curb cheating? Would they still get to experience college life with their peers? These were some of the pressing issues they raised.

There were also students who expressed nervousness or even fear as their first reaction, but eventually warmed up to the idea since they acknowledged that it was for their own safety, and saw that the local college had a plan for both students who had access to the necessary technology, and those who did not.

Meanwhile, the faculty members interviewed expressed their initial apprehensions due to either technological or pedagogical concerns. As previously mentioned, the technical profile

of the faculty was a factor to be considered in institutional practices. Those who required further training felt apprehensive at first due to the unfamiliarity of the modality through which they are expected to facilitate the teaching-learning process. As for those with pedagogical concerns, it closely mirrored the questions of the students about how academic dishonesty could be avoided and how students' progress could be accurately monitored and measured. It was not necessarily the delivery of learning that was the issue, but rather the accurate feedback as to whether the facilitated learning was effective or not.

Both faculty and students, however, experienced strong school support. The students felt guided as they participated in the enrollment process, received their Google Suite accounts from the local college's Network Infrastructure and New Media Office, and were added by their professors to their respective Google Classrooms and group chats. Some institutes even held monthly virtual meetings with the students so that the dean and program director could personally ask them how they were doing.

The faculty felt supported due to the wealth of seminars and training that were made available to them, as well as the hands-on approach of the administration. Before the first semester of offline learning began, they were trained in producing modules, managing classes remotely, and using Google Classroom, among other key skills required. Throughout the first year of implementation of offline learning, the administrators of the local college also held weekly virtual meetings with all the faculty and staff to exchange best practices and to bring up issues that needed to be addressed. One part-time faculty member, in particular, remarked that there was stronger school support from the local college than from the part-time faculty member's full-time job.

Nonetheless, both faculty and students had recommendations for innovation and change. The students requested clearer explanations in modules. Sometimes, they had to look up terms in the dictionary or search for simpler explanations of concepts on the Internet. Some students who received offline learning expressed that they would prefer to participate in online synchronous classes, where they would meet their professors through Google Meet at the assigned schedule on their enrollment forms. This is contrary to the finding in Tran (2020), which found that older learners prefer less time learning with instruction or studying online.

The students' intentions to participate in synchronous classes were also contrary to the faculty's recommendation, which was to record their own discussion videos to ensure that all students would uniformly receive the same quality of content. This was also likely due to the encouragement received from the administration to record discussion videos to be uploaded on the local college's YouTube account, where the discussion videos could be accessed not only by the local college's students, but also by independent viewers such as learners from other institutions for additional reference.

13. Significant Stories

The faculty and students were asked about how they personalized offline learning depending on their needs. The students mostly had positive stories to share, first and foremost would be the practice of peer-tutoring. The intention behind it was to ensure that none of their peers would get left behind. It was usually student-initiated, not urged by their professors or by the administration. This would happen on the group chat of their section or through a videoconferencing platform such as Google Meet. However, the students interviewed were quick to dismiss the idea that this peer-tutoring was being used as a means of enabling

academic dishonesty. If anything, it intends to remove the need to cheat by supporting the learning process.

Another positive story that students had in common was the opportunity for independent learning. They reported feeling empowered because they were no longer solely relying on what their professors were teaching, but could learn as much as they would like on their own. Independent learning was also useful for working students, who had to manage their time differently than full-time students. This was because they reported learning how to prioritize tasks, and set aside intentional time for studying.

Personalization from the faculty's side came in the form of subjective assessments such as creative outputs and essays. Although quantitative, objective-type activities were still given, the faculty could more accurately measure the learning of their students by asking them to apply what they have learned in a qualitative, subjective assessment. Some were performances, which would be pre-recorded and uploaded onto Google Classroom since they did not meet synchronously for the students to perform live. Others would be situational writing prompts, whose answers cannot be directly found in the learning materials unless through critical and creative thinking.

As much as the faculty would like to assess their students more through these subjective means, it was not always feasible for every lesson due to the large number of students that general education faculty were assigned per semester. Providing feedback for each of those outputs alone would be a time-consuming exercise, though Cerro-Martinez et al. (2020) emphasizes the need to give feedback to students.

14. Challenges and Issues

Challenges and issues were identified across communication, learning style, teaching style and time allotment.

Students mostly experienced economic challenges in consistently keeping up with their classes. There were times when they did not have sufficient load to access the Internet with mobile data, which was the only Internet subscription they had. During lean times, they would have to ask for deadline extensions from their professors for the activities that they missed.

There were also instances when they lacked laboratory equipment for the specialized courses under their college program. It was as they attempted to meet this need that their resourcefulness and creativity were most evident. At times, their professors gave consideration and sent demonstration videos for students to emulate once they had the needed resources, particularly in the field of hospitality.

As for group work activities, students emphasized how difficult it was to communicate with group mates who were not taking the activity as seriously as the rest of the group were. They would be unresponsive or noncompliant even when assigned simple tasks to help the group. Even when group mates were participative, they expressed difficulty in finding common availability to meet virtually and collaborate on their activity. Nonetheless, there were some students who appreciated that professors still assigned group work activities to allow students to interact with one another despite the physical distance.

Communication between students and faculty was not always clear, though. Some

students reported that clarity of instructions for certain activities posed a problem. They feel the need to ask for clarification from their professors, but at times they could not contact them or could not receive an immediate response. From the faculty’s perspective, there were times when the instructions were written clearly, but students did not practice reading comprehension and preferred to have the instructions spelled out for them instead.

The learning environment where the students participate in offline learning matters as well. Since several of the students from the local college come from low-income households, they usually stay in a shared space within the household where a quiet and conducive environment is not always guaranteed. It is not only an environment rife with visual and auditory distractions, but also responsibilities that they must carry out apart from studying. This led some students to accomplish their academic tasks late at night or early in the morning instead, sacrificing sleep for a conducive learning environment.

The faculty were not free from challenges in their teaching style, either. As previously mentioned, accurately assessing students was a challenge because objective-type activities, while easy to grade, are prone to academic dishonesty while subjective assessments require extensive periods of time to return with feedback.

This dilemma led to constraints in time allotments. While students reported having no problem with their deadlines and found the time allotted for their activities to be very reasonable, the faculty felt pressured to extend deadlines to accommodate students who did not submit at the prescribed time, whether it was due to economic issues (such as the aforementioned lack of load for mobile data) or time management.

Hence, flexibility from both sides of the aisle needs to be practiced, and did appear to be practiced, albeit in varying degrees.

15. Framework

Two frameworks have emerged based on the experiences shared by the faculty and students.

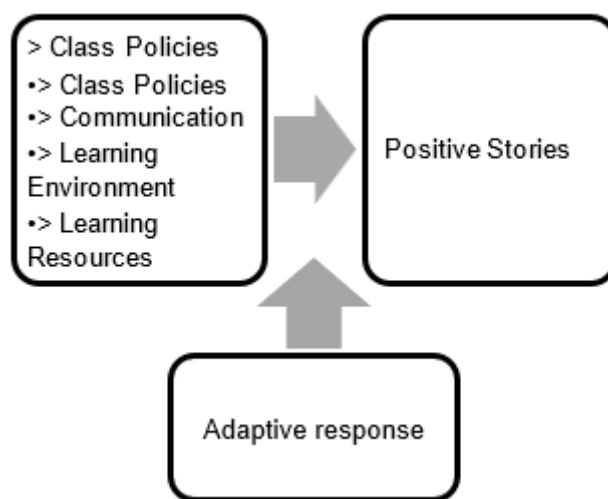


Figure 1. *Framework for Students*

The first framework demonstrates how class policies, communication, learning

environment, and learning resources could lead to positive stories when it is filtered through an adaptive response of the students toward the offline learning modality. This corroborates the idea that a conducive asynchronous learning environment is important and must have sufficient opportunities for interaction as well as alternative evaluative methods (Ozturk, 2021).

The first key variable in the framework contains four considerations that led to positive stories through an adaptive response. One of those considerations involves class policies, or the rules and guidelines set by the faculty with the students at the start of the semester, and enforced throughout the class. Another consideration is communication, or the effective and efficient flow or exchange of information between the faculty and students. The learning environment is also an important consideration, which in the context of offline learning is typically synonymous with the living situation of the students at home. Meanwhile, the learning resources consist of reference materials, faculty-issued class materials, and access to a wide range of potential sources of learning both online and offline.

The ‘positive stories’ referred to in the second key variable of the framework refer to the significant anecdotes shared by the students as a result of their experiences with class policies, communication, learning environment, and learning resources. These include the reported instances of peer tutoring, independent learning, and improved time management.

As for the ‘adaptive response,’ this refers to the perception that students had toward the start of the implementation of offline learning. It is marked by relief that they could continuously receive education, curiosity and concern as to how it would be implemented, and even excitement due to the novelty of this modality.

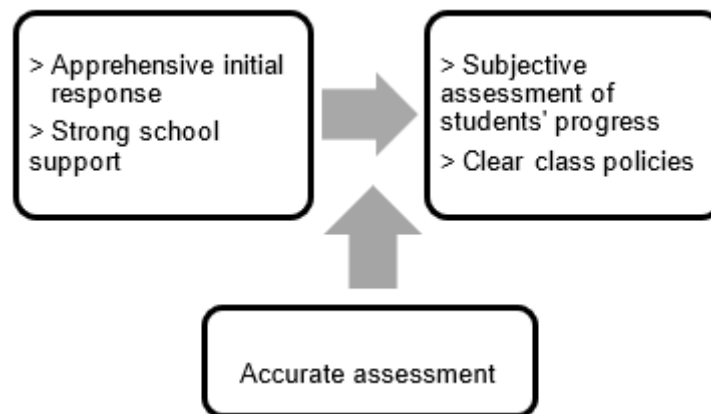


Figure 2. *Framework for Faculty*

The second framework illustrates how an apprehensive initial response coupled with strong school support could translate to subjective assessment of students’ progress and the formation of clear class policies by applying accurate assessment in offline learning.

The ‘apprehensive initial response’ mentioned in the first key variable of the second framework is rooted in the technological concerns of the faculty members who had to start learning how to use the learner management system, and in the pedagogical concerns of faculty members regarding academic honesty. It is accompanied by strong school support, which involves the provision of sufficient training to adapt to the implementation of offline learning, and necessary equipment to be used in modular and asynchronous classes.

The second key variable shows the subjective assessment of students' progress, which consists of performance tasks or writing prompts. The presence of clear class policies is also included in the second key variable, demonstrating that it is an outcome that can be expected through this framework.

Lastly, 'accurate assessment' in the context of the second framework refers to how the faculty still uphold academic standards and integrity as a key practice that cannot be overlooked in offline learning.

16. Conclusion

In light of the aforementioned information, it can be concluded that in terms of institutional practices, communication hinged on the proactivity and consistency of the faculty, while students had to adopt a more independent learning style. Both faculty and students would prefer whole-semester classes instead of having two sets of nine weeks per course, even though this was one of the expectations set during first day orientation. As for references, students relied on online resources apart from the self-paced modules and supplemental reference materials provided by the faculty.

The students' perceptions of learning delivery differed from the faculty's initial response. While the students had an adaptive response to the sudden shift to offline learning, the faculty were apprehensive about the technological and pedagogical implications. Nonetheless, both faculty and students reported experiencing strong school support. When pressed for recommendations for improvement, students relayed their preference for synchronous online classes while the faculty shared the intention to record their own discussion videos for students to watch at their own pace and convenience.

Some significant stories were also shared such as the positive experiences of the students as they personalized their learning through peer-tutoring and independent learning. The faculty, meanwhile, gave assessments that skewed more towards subjective-type activities despite the extensive time and effort needed to give students useful feedback.

Challenges and issues also arose during the implementation of offline learning, primarily from an economic perspective when it came to access to consistent, reliable Internet connection as well as laboratory equipment to be used for certain classes. Collaboration with classmates was at times difficult for students, as was the availability of a quiet, conducive learning environment when they needed it. As for the faculty, meeting their own deadlines while balancing accountability and compassion for students was one of the greatest challenges.

From these reported offline learning experiences, two frameworks have emerged that can be taken into consideration in future attempts to implement offline learning.

17. Recommendations

The following recommendations can be gleaned from the study:

1. Administrators of educational institutions are highly urged to listen to feedback, recommendations, and expressions of preferences of the faculty and students, who are the main implementers of offline learning.

2. Faculty members are encouraged to take note of the best practices as noted above and continue applying them in the offline learning setting. The points for improvement must also be noted so that possible interventions can be done.
3. Students may benefit from the documented ways in which their predecessors in the offline learning environment have coped and contributed to their own learning as well as others'.
4. Future researchers may adopt the framework which may provide end findings via deductive approach in research.
5. Lastly, this study may be viewed from a policy-making perspective to consider the long-term viability of implementing offline learning, as well as in developing a learning recovery plan in addressing the potential learning losses.

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