

# Academic Switch: Students' Resilience and Course Confidence in the Unprecedented COVID-19 Challenge

Archibeth Cardinas Flamiano<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sultan Kudarat State University, Tacurong City, Philippines

\*Corresponding Author: [bbgirlarchibethflamiano@sksu.edu.ph](mailto:bbgirlarchibethflamiano@sksu.edu.ph)

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**Abstract:** *The unprecedented COVID – 19 challenge left schools with no choice but academically switch to distance learning. This qualitative phenomenological study generally aimed to determine students' resilience and course confidence after the academic switch in response to the school shutdown. Specifically, this study wanted to answer the questions; (1) What felt changes impact positively or negatively the first-year college students' life the most? (2) In what way do first-year college students address the changes that impact their student life? (3) How does academic switch impact their confidence in acquiring knowledge on their current course? (4) What are factors that contributed to the change in course confidence? The nine (9) respondents were selected using purposive sampling. Data collection was multimodal using a questionnaire sent and retrieved through Facebook messenger and Focus Group Discussion/Semi-Structured Interview through google meet. Coding of Questionnaire data and interview transcripts followed. Results show that respondents are affected mainly on their physical, socio-emotional, and mental aspects due to less physical activity and social interaction and more assignments given in online classes. They can cope with the changes through good time management by exerting more effort in their studies and seeking support from friends and families. On the other hand, course confidence decreases due to the ineffective implementation of virtual modality. The type of college degrees, learning styles, low level of preparedness of school and faculty, and the proper feedback from the teachers are among the contributing factors to no to low course confidence. Teachers and students have to adapt to the changes to make education accessible and effective to all amidst the pandemic.*

**Keywords:** academic switch, students' resilience, course confidence, COVID-19 challenge

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## 1. Introduction

For the first time in education history, schools across the world and the Philippines, in particular, were forced to make a sudden academic switch from traditional to distance (virtual/online or modular) learning due to COVID – 19. The annual CHLOE (Changing Landscape Online Education) survey showed pros and cons to the distance learning format, especially for students used to traditional, in-class teaching and learning. In addition, a Survey Monkey poll conducted in the United States showed that keeping up with coursework, losing contact with professors/instructors, being physically isolated from classmates, and juggling with other priorities were among the challenges met by the students during the academic switch (Boiven, 2020).

There are social and emotional attributes that are uniquely Filipino. For example, the ability to show control, self-regulation, and perseverance were among the unique attributes of Filipino

students (Runduin & Reyes, 2015). Bearing in mind the challenges presented in the international poll and survey, first-year college students of the Philippines may have their way of facing the academic switch.

For this reason, the researcher would like to determine what changes impact the lives of first-year college students and their coping mechanism unique to Filipino students during the academic switch due to the unprecedented COVID – 19 challenge. The researcher would also like to explore how the academic switch affects first-year college students' confidence in acquiring knowledge on their chosen college course and enumerate factors contributing to the change in course confidence. This study will fill the information gap that will be beneficial to all teachers, administrators, and government leaders across the world who are still in the process of maneuvering themselves on how to provide quality and effective instruction during this challenging time.

## 2. Literature Review

### *Traditional Learning*

Traditional learning occurs between the learner and the teacher inside a physical classroom where students learned through direct instruction from the teacher about the subject/course. The teacher may vary instructions and strategies depending on students' academic abilities and learning styles to achieve academic success. Classroom learning, home school learning, small group learning, and laboratory learning are examples of traditional learning (Kelmendi, 2019).

### *Electronic Learning or E-Learning*

Electronic learning or E-learning is the talk of the town during this pandemic. E-learning includes online learning, distance learning, blended learning, and M-learning (according to Gray Harriman, as cited by (Kelmendi, 2019). Online learning may include synchronous and asynchronous instruction. Educators and learners conduct synchronous online classes through popular video conferencing tools like zoom, google meet, and Microsoft teams, where they can have live interactions with the teacher and classmates. Asynchronous learning occurs when the teacher gives instructions and resources through an educational platform of choice. The learner can access them at his own time and pace. Blended learning combines online with face-to-face/traditional learning. The goal is to provide the most efficient and effective instruction experience by combining delivery modalities. M-Learning or Mobile Learning refers to handheld devices such as PDAs, mobile phones, laptops, and any other handheld information technology device used in teaching and learning (Kelmendi, 2019).

### *Traditional Learning vs E-Learning*

The use of the learning methods depends on individual interests. Higher grade learners with readiness to learn without anyone's input will be fruitful with a conducive environment and personal inspiration. However, new learners, particularly the younger ones with no learning background, would not acknowledge distance learning as they may think about its difficulty with no communication with the instructor/educator to clarify their uncertainty. A noteworthy impediment to distance learning is that the learners need self-control. While having the capacity to work at one's very own pace can be leveraged, it can likewise be a hindrance. Managing time or procrastination is one issue learners encounter during distance learning. For these learners, the traditional method is progressively effective (Kelmendi, 2019).

Most people cannot imagine a "classroom without walls," nor a completely different way of studying. Most learners believe that it is unimaginable not to go to the faculty and not attend

physical classrooms. They will lack the feeling of being academic citizens (Shukla, 2020), while teachers who lack professional development on the current teaching trends may utilize face-to-face educational practices in the online environments (Kreber & Kanuka, 2006 cited by Andrews, 2018).

Angelu and Economides (2010), as cited by Accad (2015), stated that, in order to compete globally, schools must maximize their investments by carefully choosing real options since current trends in research have many investment requirements, assumptions, and risks, and, this exposure to online causes students to deviate from their real purpose of schooling.

Several studies are comparing online and traditional education. Online education delivery is convenient using online video conferencing tools in synchronous instruction. Commuting to school is not necessary, thereby saving a great deal of time and money. It allows studying from home, with a reliable computer and good internet connection and demonstrating basic computer skills. Online education lessens additional expenses usually entailed by traditional campus life like commuting; and study materials. Feedbacking is much better in traditional learning since learners can interact readily with teachers and classmates. Online education has an apparent positive effect on the environment. It may not be measurable now, but if online education essentially replaces traditional institutions shortly, it will mean less paper for books and writing material and building fewer campuses (Behzadi, Z. & Ghaffari, A., 2011).

#### *Students' Course Confidence*

Students' confidence is vital as they pursue their degrees to prevent dropouts, low motivation, and frustrations. To ensure that their confidence is high, students should maintain their love for learning and their motivation to endure amidst challenges and circumstances. As they gradually acquire the necessary skills and expertise, they will become confident in their college courses and their chosen career in the future. The pandemic has brought a sudden change from traditional to distant learning modalities. The shift causes many hesitations and frustrations on the part of the students. According to Landrum (2020), the more confident a student in using online platform during online learning and managing time efficiently, the more students become satisfied with their online learning experience and will find the modality very helpful. On the other hand, students who lack the technological skills will find online learning a burden as they have to cope with the assignments given while learning how to use technology.

#### *Internet Connection and Use in the Philippines*

The pandemic has resulted in internet connectivity and devices at their peak to cater to the need to deliver distance (online/modular) instruction after the physical classrooms shutdown. The internet connectivity issue became evident, and Filipinos' outcry to more reliable and fast connectivity became even louder. Comparing the internet capability of the Philippines to other neighboring countries, the internet strength lags among the countries in Asia, making it rank 104 out of the 160 countries. This slow and costly internet connection in the Philippines is the lack of competition in the market. The cost of internet connectivity added a burden to the parents of the students conducting online classes.

### **3. Methodology**

#### *Participants of the Study*

The participants of the study were nine (9) first-year college students selected through purposive sampling. Currently enrolled students in any higher educational institutions in the

island of Mindanao of the Philippines, who used to get education through traditional learning during their high school years and who underwent an academic switch to distance (online or modular) learning were selected. The population is uncertain, and there is difficulty in computing the representation of the participants. In this case, according to Calmoren, as cited by Accad and Accad (2016), purposive quota sampling is appropriate to be used.

### *Research Instruments*

The study used a questionnaire to gather basic information of the participants to establish the profile for discussion purposes and elicit qualitative information on how the academic switch caused changes to their life as a student and their coping mechanism in response to the felt changes. It also gathered information about their course confidence in acquiring knowledge on their college course and the factors contributing to the change in course confidence. The study also used google meet to gather additional qualitative information like answers to follow-up questions, voice and facial reactions from the respondents in a friendly and trustworthy environment, so students could fully express their thoughts and feelings without hesitation.

### *Research Design*

The study used a phenomenological qualitative research design that used a questionnaire to answer open-ended questions relevant to the problem. Focus group discussion and semi-structured interview followed, allowing the researcher to ask to clarify additional questions as the need arises to acquire more facts that may be essential and relevant to the study. The best method in qualitative research is to combine more appropriate techniques as the need arises in the actual conduct of the study (Accad and Accad, 2016).

### *Data Gathering Processes*

Before the data collection, the researcher wrote all the topics that she knew about the study. She then formulated relevant questions to elicit qualitative information from the respondents. The researcher selected her respondents and sent them the communication letter through a Facebook messenger containing the background, purpose, procedures, confidentiality clause, and the consent form for the respondents to sign. The said letter also contained the open-ended questions that the respondents can answer in English, Tagalog, or their dialects. The researcher gathered the completed questionnaire after a week to peruse through Facebook messenger.

A semi-structured interview of participants followed after all data from the questionnaire was collected. Semi-structured interviews provide an open opportunity for possibilities. It is adequately structured to address relevant topics related to the phenomenon of the study while giving the participants a breath of air to express their views of the study (Galletta, 2013). In the Focus Group Discussion (FGD), seven participants (two were not available during the scheduled time) answered questions for at least five minutes and an extension for follow-up questions. Other participants were allowed to add or comment using the chat box after each respondent's time to answer the question to contain good discussion and capture unexpected qualitative information relevant to the study. During the FGD and semi-structured interview conducted via google meet, the researcher used a written interview guide to make sure that every area of the study was covered (Polit & Beck, 2012). Furthermore, the researcher used pen and paper to detail the non-verbal gestures and captivating words. The researcher also asked permission to audio record the conversation to capture spontaneous responses and the actual verbatim since semi-structured interviews may develop unexpected responses.

The data gathering process ended once sufficient and credible data were collected and information saturation was already evident.

### *Researcher's Positioning*

This study used the non-numerical description to analyze the responses to the perceived reality of the phenomenon. The felt changes and coping mechanisms of first-year college students were presented in theme and concepts to point out the different angles of the issue in the neutral ground in the guide questions and FGD/Semi-structured interview. Thematic in the pure verbose description was used to present the results of the study. The researcher had worked in the Philippines educational setting for 14 years using the traditional approach in teaching and had hands-on experience on distance learning (online, blended, and modular) because of her work as an international teacher in the United States of America for six years. She has valuable experiences on both learning modalities and cannot pinpoint which is the best as they both offer an equal share of advantages and disadvantages. In this case, it is a clear statement that the researcher brackets her biases in presenting data collected from the study.

### *Data Analysis*

#### *Felt Changes After the Academic Switch*

COVID-19 has become a pandemic. In the Philippines, this translated into thousands of confirmed cases and deaths (WHO, January 12, 2021). The government had opted to employ quarantine protocols and temporarily shut down educational institutions to control the spread. Filipino learners across academic levels stayed home to follow health protocols and preventive measures by the government. The government has implemented policies to continue education despite the school shutdown. Distance learning through synchronous and asynchronous instruction was adapted (Oztok et al., 2013) to ensure education is accessible for all.

The academic switch specifically affected this school year's freshmen college students. They were very eager to engage in new learning adventures and look forward to a brand-new environment that would mean living away from the place they grow up. In the questionnaire, FGD, and semi-structured interview results, the physical, socio-emotional, and mental aspects of their lives affected students when distance learning was employed. Physically, since they were only at home, they did not need to exert much effort to attend classes that agreed to the study of Behzadi, Z. & Ghaffari, A. (2011) that distance learning is convenient. Most became less inactive and lazy because all they had to do was attend an online class, listen to the teacher for lecture (for online students), and flexible work time (for modular learning students). They did not feel the school vibe, and many distractions were there that focusing on class (online) or doing assignments (modular) was a struggle which was contrary to Kelmindi's (2019) study, higher-grade learners with readiness to learn without anyone's input would be fruitful with a conducive environment and personal inspiration. For the socio-emotional aspect, most of them believed that after the academic switch, they had no chance to socialize, which agreed with the study of Shukla (2020). The lack of interaction between classmates and the teachers resulted in making new friends a challenge. Mentally, some students felt anxious, uncertain of the unknown, and stressed; others found it hard to do distance learning due to lack of experience in online classes and more workload assigned. Students felt that distance learning is not for them because it did not support their learning styles and needs, and teachers were giving them more workload that they felt overwhelmed and needed more time to complete assignments than traditional learning.

Most of the students are used to traditional face-to-face learning where teachers and students need to go to a physical classroom, and the lively daily interaction made it the most common choice of learning modality. The felt changes experienced by the students were the result of a sudden change to distance learning. Different changes took place in various aspects of their

lives, but the lack of physical activity, social interaction, and mental burn-outs was the felt changes.

### *The Choice to Adapt*

Resilience is an imperative process of returning to stability, a solid Filipino value. Filipinos are often resilient, evident on their way to recover from adversities influenced mainly by family, being religious, and the sense of community (Nicomedes, 2020).

The respondents of this study, the first-year college students, were an exemplar of what resilience is all about in this challenging time. Most students said having good time management, a positive mindset, and exerting more effort to cope with changes and challenges in acquiring the knowledge and skills of their college courses as well as being resourceful and innovative with the robust support system of family and friends made them gradually adapted to the changes. Some school has made the transition easier by being prepared and by providing better resources. Students also specified that most of them turned to old friends to interact through messenger calls, discord, google meet, and other online social platforms when they felt bored and overwhelmed to address issues concerning the lack of physical activity, social interaction and mental burn-outs.

The students themselves must know how to channel their energy into something positive and motivate them to direct their attention to the goals they set for themselves. It needs much determination, but they are the only ones who can make it possible. Friends and family members must be present and support students during this challenging time. On the other hand, social presence is one of the disregarded aspects of online education during the academic switch. Teachers' limited technological capabilities and training make them less confident in delivering instructions and incorporating social presence in their instruction online to make students learn even outside the four corners of the physical classroom.

### *Course Confidence and Determining Factors*

The academic switch decreased the course confidence of the first-year college students. Type of college course, learning styles, low level of preparedness of school and faculty, and the lack of right and immediate feedback from the teachers were contributing factors mentioned in the answers of their questionnaire and FGD/Semi-structured interview.

Most of them believed that they were not confident in the learning modality they have right now. Students said that it all depended on the course one is taking. Their course needed a hands-on - "learning by doing" approach, and distance learning did not meet that criterion, while for some, other courses could offer better online instruction through simulations of experiments and programming.

Students stated in their answers in the questionnaire and FGD/Semi-structured interview that individual learning style is another factor to decreased confidence. Visual and kinesthetic learners find it hard to learn when the teacher utilizes pure lectures presented through PowerPoint. The respondents also mentioned that some schools and their teachers were not ready for the academic switch. There are scheduling issues, and technologically challenged teachers are struggling in delivering online instructions. Students' lack of confidence is also related to teachers' lack of skills to manipulate online tools and platforms.

The teacher's lack of correct and immediate feedback, which agrees with Behzadi, Z. & Ghaffari, A. (2011), decreased the course confidence. Some students agreed that as a visual

learner, acquiring knowledge is effective by seeing a specific procedure demonstrated in person. However, learning through lectures is challenging and makes them less confident. Students learned best through hands-on experience, with immediate feedback from teachers, especially courses that demand experiential learning. Feedbacking to address misconceptions and straighten understanding is missing that causes students' confidence to go down.

The COVID-19 challenge switched the learning modality of acquiring knowledge. Knowing how much knowledge they could have acquired and how much they have missed made the first-year college students of the school year 2020 – 2021 less confident about maximizing their learning potential in their college courses.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The academic switch significantly impacted the lives of the students, particularly the first-year college students who were the respondents of this study. Therefore, the objective of this study was to identify the felt changes students experienced after the academic switch due to the unprecedented COVID-19 challenge. The lack of physical activity, fewer social-emotional interactions, and mental burn-outs topped the list of felt changes. These indicate that the online learning environment needs a significant overhaul to make the online learning modality work for students in the Philippine setting.

Coping mechanisms became evident after realizing that their actions were detrimental to realizing their dreams – a college degree. Good time management, a positive mindset, and extra effort, being resourceful and innovative with the support of families and old friends help students cope and adapt to the felt changes brought by the academic switch.

No to low course confidence of first-year college students on their course was another significant finding of this study. As cited by Landrum in 2020; “while some students perceive online and face-to-face classes to be equally effective and of similar quality, not all students find online courses satisfactory or to be their preferred learning modality.” The study showed that online learning was not satisfactory and the preferred learning modality by students considering the type of college course, learning styles, low level of preparedness of school and faculty, and the lack of right and immediate feedback from the teachers. These factors contributed to a decrease of confidence level in maximizing their learning potential to the learning modality offered due to the academic switch.

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