

## COVID-19 Constructs of College Students and New Normal Learning Delivery Modalities in Higher Education



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### ABSTRACT

The coronavirus disease 2019, or COVID-19, forced the shift from normal to the new normal in the Philippines, the ASEAN region, and the rest of the world. This descriptive-qualitative inquiry sought to uncover the COVID-19 constructs of college students and to determine new normal learning delivery modalities in the context of a state-owned higher education institution. Anchored on the constructivist lens and the grounded theory, Ricoeur's hermeneutic analysis served as a method of exploring the narratives. The perceived effects of the community quarantines were modes of schooling changed, mental health was tested, internet connectivity problems, economic impacts, and boredom. To better respond to the pandemic, the participants believed that the higher education institution may listen to all stakeholders, learn from other universities, and formulate research-based actions. Modular and online modes wherein blended learning synchronously and asynchronously served as the operational learning delivery modalities of the higher education institution. The learning delivery modalities of the higher education institution complied with the policies and guidelines of the national government, local government units, and the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases. The new normal learning delivery modalities in a higher education institution based on the constructs of the COVID-19 pandemic of college students were formulated. The results of this study may serve as bases for developing participatory and proactive educational policies and guidelines in transitioning from normal to the new normal.

**Keywords :** Constructs, COVID-19, higher education institution, learning delivery modalities, new normal

### 1. Introduction

As a global pandemic, the coronavirus disease 2019 or commonly known as COVID-19, drastically halted the normal hectic routines of people from all walks of life from different nations. It is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus (WHO, 2020). The social contexts encompassing a community is affected. This pandemic caused the community quarantines imposed by the Philippine government to be implemented. Classes were forced to cut short. Modifications to prevent the disruption of classes, including flexible, distance, and online modes,

were attempted. Students were not able to attend classes during the last leg of the academic year.

The COVID-19 pandemic is, first and foremost, a health crisis. Many countries have (rightly) decided to close schools, colleges, and universities. Teaching is moving online on an untested and unprecedented scale. Student assessments are also moving online, with much trial and error and uncertainty. Many assessments have been canceled. Importantly, these interruptions will not just be a short-term issue but can also have long-term consequences for the affected cohorts and are likely

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to increase inequality. COVID-19 significantly impacts education and the students' families (Burgess and Sievertsen, 2020). Higher educational institutions are confronted with concerns on how students may be able to cope with the pandemic and may thereby still provide them effective and continuous desirable learning experiences.

UNESCO (2020) tackled the impact of COVID-19 on students. With educational institutions closing in 191 countries at all levels, learning continues through distance, notably digital solutions. Yet, for many students in tertiary education, online teaching is not an option. The concerns raised were overcoming digital and economic divides, the inclusion of students with disabilities, and mitigating loss of livelihood.

There needs to be more information on the perceived effects of the community quarantines and the expected responses from the higher education institutions that may lead to informed decisions about the learning delivery modalities implemented. Cognizant of these contexts, the researchers attempted to explore this research interest. This study aimed to capture and describe the COVID-19 pandemic constructs from narratives college students tell, leading to the identification of the new normal learning delivery modalities implemented by higher education institution.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

This study is anchored on the constructivist's lens to establish the plausibility of generating knowledge through grounded theory. Knowledge can be created and co-created as people reflect upon their experiences to build on integrating representations and schemas for sense-making.

### **Methodology**

This descriptive-qualitative inquiry explored the plausibility of stories as data elicited through online communication from 48 college students from March 18 to June 18, 2020, in the Province of Capiz. University officials in the academic and student affairs units served as key informants. The participants and key informants were chosen on the assumption that they could provide rich cases for the study in depth. The anonymity of the participants and key informants was maintained to protect their privacy. Ricoeur's hermeneutic analysis, general in-

ductive approach (Thomas, 2006), and in vivo coding (Saldana, 2009) were used to analyze and check the data transcripts' trustworthiness.

### **Research Results and Findings** **Constructs on the Perceived Effects of the Community Quarantines**

It can be noted that the participants believed that the mode of schooling changed, their mental health was tested, there were internet connectivity problems, and economic impacts may be felt.

#### **Modes of schooling changed.**

Because of the imposed quarantine measures, college students claimed that the university was obliged to adjust the modes of schooling before the second semester of 2019-2020 ended and before the first semester of 2020-2021 started.

#### **Mental health is tested.**

The participants felt that their fears of getting infected with COVID-19 and the volume of information acquired might possibly test their mental health as this may trigger stress and anxiety.

#### **Internet connectivity problems.**

Students who were eager to submit their requirements and/or learn at their own pace online encountered problems with internet connectivity due to access, ownership, and location issues.

#### **Economic impacts.**

Jobs were affected. In a way, the community quarantines halted the struggling working students from finding means to support themselves financially. Some of their family members were also affected, especially those covered by the No Work, No Pay policy.

The perceived effects of the community quarantines on the participants range from personal to holistic psychological and dwindling socio-economic outcomes. This supported the claim of the National Economic and Development Authority (2020) in a report that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought economic impact. The hit to global growth is imminent, with a worldwide recession on the horizon. NEDA further reiterated that if we are unsuccessful in navigating through this pandemic-induced economic crisis, we enter the third chapter: social and political crisis.

### **Constructs on COVID-19 Response of the Higher Education Institution**

The participants' constructs on how the higher education institution may respond to the COVID-19 pandemic signified that the participants considered that the university may listen to all stakeholders, verify sources of information, learn from the experiences of other universities, and formulate research-based actions.

#### **Listen to all stakeholders.**

A basic tenet in communicating for social change and development is listening before telling. The participants believed in a participatory and inclusive approach to responding to the pandemic.

#### **Learn from the experiences of other universities.**

On a global scale, the participants believed that it might be beneficial for the higher education institution to learn, adapt, or improvise the best practices of other universities in implementing initiatives amidst the COVID-10 pandemic.

#### **Formulate research-based actions.**

Participants were more keen that in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, the university's academic plans and initiatives may be backed up with research-based actions to ensure that the safety of everyone is guaranteed.

The participants took time to develop sound recommendations or suggestions on how they perceive the government may effectively and efficiently further improve their responses, efforts, and initiatives in handling the COVID-19 pandemic. In the United Nations' Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and Beyond (2020), the policy recommendation is to strengthen the resilience of education systems for equitable and sustainable development by focusing on equity and exclusion, reinforcing capacities for risk management at all levels of the system, ensure strong leadership and coordination, and enhance consultation and communication mechanisms.

### **New Normal Learning Delivery Modalities in a Higher Education Institution**

Constructs on the perceived effects of the community quarantines on college students and the constructs on how the higher education institution

may respond to the COVID-19 pandemic were deliberated by concerned units. This contributed to the formulation of the new normal learning delivery modalities to enrich the learning continuity plan of the university. The learning delivery modalities are expected to address disruptions of classes during the previous and current semesters amidst the community quarantines due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The higher education institution complied with the policies and guidelines of the national government, local government units, and the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases. In formulating the new normal learning delivering modalities implemented by the higher education institution, the modular and online modes wherein blended learning in a synchronous and asynchronous manner were applied. These learning delivery modalities were considered flexible learning.

#### **Modular mode.**

The modular mode of classes was done by distributing the modules, learning packets, learning guides, and other learning materials to the students either by providing hard copies and/or soft copies sent via online platforms and/or by copying the learning materials to the flash drive of the learners. For students below 21 years old, their parents or guardians may get it to the assigned area.

#### **Online mode.**

In an online learning mode, there are course facilitators who will reach out to students. This option was chosen by students who have the availability of internet connectivity and gadgets in their respective localities. Varied online platforms may be used in the conduct of online classes.

#### **Blended learning.**

The higher education institution also encourages blended learning. This is done by combining online face-to-face discussion with the modular mode of learning.

#### **Synchronous/asynchronous learning.**

Synchronous learning may happen simultaneously for the teacher and the students. Real-time interaction is possible. In asynchronous learning, the interaction between the teacher and the learners does not occur simultaneous-

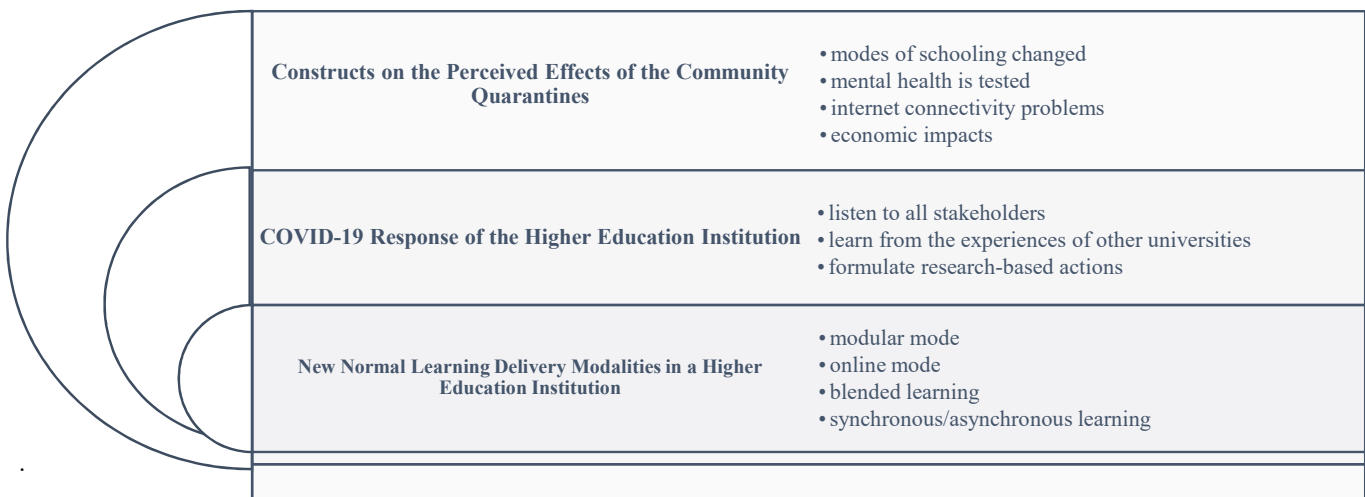
ly. These two are essential in blended learning. As the health crisis unfolded, causing massive socio-economic disruptions, education systems around the world were swift to react and adapt. Governments responded quickly to ensure education continuity and protect the safety of learners and education actors by closing schools and other learning spaces. Several educational institutions worldwide encountered almost the same concerns and have decided to utilize a wide range of distance learning tools; efforts were made to promote inclusive learning, support teachers' needs, and no single schedule for reopening educational institutions.

The formulated new normal learning delivery modalities in a higher education institution based on the constructs of the COVID-19 pandemic of college students is reflected in Figure 1.

teachers' readiness, expand the definition of the right to education to include connectivity entitlement, remove barriers to connectivity, strengthen data and monitoring of learning, and strengthen the articulation and flexibility across levels and types of education and training (UN, 2020).

**Conclusions**

The perceived effects of the community quarantines mirror the multiple realities in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic ranging from a personal scale to a more complicated holistic level. Actions to be taken by the higher education institution to better respond to the COVID-19 pandemic echo the voices of college students on what they believe is necessary to effectively and efficiently address gaps in the current global health risk crisis. The learning delivery



**Figure 1. Formulated new normal learning delivery modalities in a higher education institution based on the constructs of the COVID-19 pandemic of college students.**

These new normal learning delivery modalities were formulated based on the constructs of the perceived effects of the community quarantines and the responses expected from the higher education institution. Through a consensus, the key officials considered these concerns to address this concern.

One of the policy recommendations of the United Nations is to reimagine education and accelerate positive change in teaching and learning by focusing on addressing learning losses and prevention dropouts, particularly of marginalized groups, offering skills for employability programs, supporting the teaching profession and

modalities implemented by the higher education institution were grounded on the availability of the technological infrastructure to both the university and the learners and the applicability of the learning approaches in the local context. The constructs on actions to be taken by the higher education institution may be pondered by the local and national government units, the academe, and other sectors to develop more participatory and proactive educational policies and guidelines concerning the COVID-19 pandemic and in transitioning from normal to the new normal.

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