Students' Opportunities, Challenges and Coping Mechanisms in Limited Face-To-Face Classes in Eastern Samar State University, Philippines

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Abstract: Students' Opportunities, Challenges and Coping Mechanisms in Limited Face-To-Face Classes. Objectives: This study aimed to determine the students' opportunities, challenges and coping mechanisms in limited face-to-face classes at the College of Education, Eastern Samar State University. **Methods:** A total of 74 students agreed to participate in the study. They had to make a weekly journal log to determine the challenges and opportunities in limited face-to-face classes. Moreover, Six focus group discussions with three randomly chosen students were also done as another data source. **Findings:** Among the students' learning opportunities were in-depth conceptual understanding, self-paced learning, self-regulated learning, and prompt teachers' feedback. On the other hand, the learning challenges encountered by the students were internet connectivity glitches and course design issues. From the challenges identified by the students, relocating to other places with good internet speed and asking for help from classmates were their coping mechanisms for internet connectivity glitches, while asking for help from classmates and understanding the issues through peer support were students' coping mechanisms for course design issues. **Conclusion:** The students' opportunities of limited face-to-face classes led them to succeed in their academic performance; moreover, they could cope with all the challenges they faced during the limited face-to-face classes.

Keywords: limited face-to-face classes, coping mechanism, university student.

Abstrak: Peluang, Tantangan dan Mekanisme Coping Mahasiswa dalam Kelas Tatap Muka Terbatas. Tujuan: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui peluang, tantangan, dan mekanisme koping siswa dalam kelas tatap muka terbatas di Sekolah Tinggi Pendidikan, Universitas Negeri Samar Timur. Metode: Sebanyak 74 siswa setuju untuk berpartisipasi dalam penelitian ini. Mereka harus membuat log jurnal mingguan untuk menentukan tantangan dan peluang dalam kelas tatap muka terbatas. Selain itu, enam diskusi kelompok terarah dengan tiga siswa yang dipilih secara acak juga dilakukan sebagai sumber data lainnya. Temuan: Di antara kesempatan belajar siswa adalah pemahaman konseptual yang mendalam, pembelajaran mandiri, pembelajaran mandiri, dan umpan balik guru yang cepat. Di sisi lain, tantangan pembelajaran yang dihadapi mahasiswa adalah gangguan konektivitas internet dan masalah desain perkuliahan. Dari tantangan yang diidentifikasi oleh siswa, pindah ke tempat lain dengan kecepatan internet yang baik dan meminta bantuan dari teman sekelas adalah mekanisme koping mereka untuk gangguan konektivitas internet, sementara meminta bantuan dari teman sekelas dan memahami masalah melalui dukungan teman sebaya adalah mekanisme koping siswa untuk masalah desain kursus. Kesimpulan: Kesempatan siswa untuk kelas tatap muka yang terbatas membuat mereka berhasil dalam prestasi akademik mereka; selain itu, mereka dapat mengatasi semua tantangan yang mereka hadapi selama kelas tatap muka yang terbatas.

Kata kunci: kelas tatap muka terbatas, mekanisme koping, mahasiswa.

- **INTRODUCTION**

The COVID -19 pandemic has vastly affected the education sector of the world (Astafeva et al., 2020; and Jon-Chao et al., 2021). Educators and learners resorted to distance education, such as the traditional print-based modules, and synchronous and asynchronous online learning. At the same time, parents at home become teachers since they are called to monitor their children's education. (Lapada et al., 2021; Casacchia et, al., 2021; and Pawilen, 2021). Webinars also became a temporary shelter for teachers seeking professional growth, no more cozy events place, and fancy food for attendees (Leonardo & Cha, 2021; and Mishra et al., 2021). Moreover, the World Health Organization (WHO) has advised all schools across the globe to conduct school-based alternative learning systems to alleviate the cancellation of classes (World Bank, 2020a). In fact, The WHO and World Bank's Edtech Team collaborated to establish a program that provides online materials intended to learners across the world in this time of the pandemic. The program goals are to avoid learning loss and provide distance learning to students while their physical schools are closed (World Bank, 2020b).

Now that the COVID-19 cases are slowly decreasing in the Philippines, several education sectors are planning to open a full implementation of face-to-face classes in the country (Aurelio, 2022; Flores, 2022). Three hundred-four (304) schools from the Department of Education (DepEd) now offer limited face-to-face classes. These schools across the country belonged to places bearing COVID-19 Alert levels 1 and 2. One hundred- eighteen (118) schools are from Manila, twelve (12) schools from Cagayan Valley, one hundred-six (106) schools from Central Luzon, fifty-seven (57) schools from Calabazon, and sixteen (16) schools from Eastern Visayas (Magsambol, 2022). Further, the senate essential education committee chairman, Sherwin Gatchalian, believes that primary education can reopen face-to-face at least 50% capacity of each school in the first quarter of 2022 (Casayuran, 2022; and Santos, 2021).

The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) and Department of Health (DOH) have released a joint memorandum circular Number 2021-001 titled "Guidelines on the Gradual Reopening of Campuses of Higher Education Institutions for limited Face-To-Face Classes during The Covid-19 Pandemic". This joint memorandum circular aims to guide the state university and colleges (SUC) and private higher education institutions (HEI) to hold limited face to face classes and to abide by the minimum health protocols mandated by the Enter-Agency Task Force on the Management of Emerging and Infectious Diseases (IATF) on their respective school premises (CHED and DOH, 2021). Through this joint memorandum circular, some SUC and other private HEI in the Philippines are now offering limited face-to-face classes in the Philippines, especially in degree courses related to health and other degree courses with laboratories in its curriculum (Deiparine, 2021; Talabong, 2022; Lapada, 2022).

The WHO made a guideline for reopening limited face-to-face classes. This guideline is titled "Checklist to support schools reopening and preparation for COVID-19 resurgences or similar public health crises" this guideline aims to augment the observance with the COVID-19 protocol. At Eastern Samar State University (ESSU), COVID-19 protocols were also implemented to prepare the limited face-to-face classes. The COVID-19 protocols implemented in the university were students must have health insurance, be fully vaccinated, and be physically and mentally fit to attend limited face-to-face classes (ESSU, 2021a). Limited face-to-face classes would help lessen academic losses among students, encouraging students to improve their performance compared with distance education

learning (Sutriyanto, 2021). In the study of Alpathin et al. (2022) titled "Challenges and Opportunities of the Implementation of Limited Face-to-face Learning in the Elementary School," the challenge in implementing limited face-to-face instruction is the discipline needed to maintain the school's overall health and prevent it from becoming into a center for the expansion of COVID-19 or a campus cluster.

Thus, this study aimed to determine the students' opportunities, challenges and coping mechanisms in limited face-to-face classes in ESSU, College of Education.

■ METHODS
Research Design

This study is qualitative research, specifically a phenomenological study which aimed to describe, understand and interpret the meanings of experiences of human life. This study focused on research questions such as what it is like to experience a particular situation. (Creswell, 2013). Thus, this study determined the students' opportunities, challenges and coping mechanisms in limited face-to-face classes at ESSU College of Education. Data triangulation of two data sources were considered in this study. The primary data source was the transcript of the focus group discussions (FGD) taken from the six FGDs with student-participants. In addition, the weekly journal log of the students was also considered in this study to confirm the data from the FGDs.

Research locale

This study was conducted at the ESSU College of Education. The College offers two programs, namely: Bachelor of Elementary Education (BEE, D) and Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSED), with specializations in English, Filipino, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies. The College comprises 21 faculty members and 846 students for 2021-2022 and is currently implementing limited face-to-face classes. From 54 hours of teacher-student encounters for every course, 27 hours were recited onsite. The other 27 hours were recited via distance learning—which can be modular via printed materials and online learning.

Participants of the Study

A total of 526 students were officially enrolled from first-year to third-year levels of BEED and BSED programs. The fourth-year students were excluded since they were already doing their internship outside the university. From this number, only 74 students agreed to participate in the study. Student-participants were asked to write a weekly journal log guided by questions about opportunities, challenges and coping mechanisms of limited face-to-face classes. Moreover, six FGDs with three chosen members from the students were done.

The inclusion criteria for the student-participants were; first, they must be officially enrolled during the data gathering of the study and must be first-year, second-year, or third-year levels of BEED and BSED programs. Moreover, the 18 students included in the FGD were purposefully selected by their teacher-advisers, which they thought could really tell their experiences during the limited face-to-face classes. These students signed another consent form for the conduct of FGD. Moreover, the utmost ethical consideration was observed during the conduct of the study.

Data Gathering Procedure

The 74 student-participants wrote their experiences in their weekly journal log. The researcher made this journal log to determine students' opportunities, challenges and coping mechanisms in a limited face-to-face class, and some of his colleagues validated questions in the

Table 1. Respondents of the Study

Respondents	Number of Participants
BEED 1 (FGD 1)	3
BEED 2 (FGD 2)	3
BEED 3 (FGD 3)	3
BSED 1 (FGD 4)	3
BSED 2 (FGD 5)	3
BSED 3 (FGD 6)	3
Total	18

journal log. Eighteen student-participants were invited to the College of Education to share their opportunities, challenges and coping mechanisms during the limited face-to-face classes after the semester. The 18 students involved in the FGD were asked to secure another consent form. After the second semester of 2021-2022, the FGD was done with the six FGD groups. The researcher also made the FGD questions and validated them with his colleague. The FGD comprises three sets of questions, 10 for the opportunities and 10 for the challenges and coping mechanisms of limited face-to-face classes. The student-partcipants were grouped according to their year level so that they would feel comfortable sharing their ideas. Questions asked to student-participants were asked until saturation of data was attained. Moreover, student-participants' responses were interrogated thoroughly. After generating themes from the transcripts of focus group discussions and students' journal logs, the participants were invited to confirm or check the study results.

However, out of 18 students who participated in the FGD, only 16 attended the meeting, and all agreed on the study results.

Ethical Consideration

Prior to the gathering of data, the researcher asked students if they wanted to get involved with the study and signed a consent form. Every individual has the right to refuse to participate in the study, especially on the FGDs or to stop their participation at any time. Therefore, no identifying information was kept in the notes or final report. A permission request to conduct the study was also secured and signed by the College Dean where the study was conducted.

Qualitative Data Analyses

Thematic analysis of data was done using the Braun and Clarke (2013) protocol. The Braun and Clarke (2013) protocol is summarized below:

Table 2. Process of thematic Analysis adapted in this study

Phase	Description
Familiarizing myself with the data;	Reading and re-reading, and formulating initial ideas of the transcribed data from weekly journal logs and FGD transcripts.
Generating initial codes;	Collecting data relevant to the identified initial codes.
Searching for themes;	Formulating themes from the analyzed initial codes by gathering data relevant to potential themes.

Reviewing themes;	Choosing the appropriate themes and comparing the themes to generate a thematic "map" of the analysis.
Defining and naming themes:	Generating clear definitions and names for the formulated themes and refining the specifics of each theme.
Producing the report.	Selecting clear and compelling extract examples, relating these samples to the research questions and literature, and producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

■ **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This phase summarizes the results and discussions of this study. Six transcripts from focus group discussions and journal logs were triangulated to determine the following students' opportunities, challenges and coping mechanisms during the limited face-to-face classes at ESSU College of Education. The transcripts were analyzed by the researcher and then confirmed by two experts in treating qualitative data.

Table 3 depicts the students' learning opportunities during the limited face-to-face conducted by the ESSU College of Education for the second semester of the school year 2021-2022. Under the theme, learning opportunities are the categories of in-depth conceptual understanding, self-paced learning, self-regulated learning, and prompt teachers' feedback.

The first benefit that the students agreed on was in-depth conceptual understanding. Among the subcategories are logical thinking, the use of challenging questions, and contemplation. The practical examples of certain lessons given to the students during the face-to-face classes promoted critical thinking (Alsaleh, 2020). Teachers' challenging questions also helped students think logically, leading to an in-depth understanding of concepts. Moreover, some teachers provided reflection questions and papers that made students contemplate their learning (Wyatt, 2020). Implementing limited face-to-face classes positively improved students' conceptual understanding of certain lessons. These results agreed with the study of Hasanah & Malik (2020), where they focused on determining the effect of blended learning on undergraduate students' critical thinking and communication skills.

Self-directed learning was among the students' affordance in the limited face-to-face learning conducted by the college. The limited face-to-face classes for courses without laboratory were taught for 54 hours during the whole semester. The students had their face-to-face classes alternate with distance learning through modular instruction via hardcopy or soft-copy modules, depending on the teachers' and students' preferences. This set-up of learning enabled students to learn at their own pace since some topics were taught through modular instruction (Dayagbil et al., 2021). The significance of self-directed learning is crucial during this time of the pandemic. Hence, students must receive instructional materials promoting self-directed learning (Singaram, Naidoo, & Singh, 2022).

Another opportunity gained by students in limited face-to-face learning was self-regulated learning. Some students found the instructional modules very interactive, which led them to get motivated by the lessons. Even the pictures and designs of the modules were also found by the students very helpful in learning. Some teachers' localizations of the lesson also helped students

learn since they felt connected to the lessons. Moreover, the instructional strategies used during the face-to-face classes help them to be self-regulated (Lapada, 2022). Therefore, schools should promote the use of competencies for self-regulated learning. Self-regulated learning must be valued and considered an educational skill for fostering life-long learning. (Berger et al., 2021).

The last advantage gained by the students from the limited face-to-face classes was prompt teachers' feedback. Students were able to compare their experiences of pure modular learning and limited face-to-face learning. In the limited face-to-face learning, students could ask their teachers questions regarding the concepts in their modules during the face-to-face encounters. Moreover, they also received written and oral feedback from the teachers, which is very hard to do in pure asynchronous modular learning. COVID-19 has affected the feedback practices of teachers in their students due to the shift from face-to-face classes to distance learning (Almahasees, Mohsen & Amin, 2021). Therefore, teachers' feedback must be considered an essential aspect of students' learning during the pandemic. Teachers' feedback on students' performance could pave the way for a more positive and inclusive learning environment (Fine, Leung, Tonni, & Louca, 2022).

Table 3. Learning opportunities during the limited face-to-face classes

Theme	Categories	Subcategories	Initial Codes
Learning Opportunities	In-depth Conceptual Understanding	Critical thinking	*Our teachers gave us some practical situations that led us to think logically.*
		Use challenging questions	*Our teachers challenged us for asking problems that made us curious about the topic.*
		Contemplation	*In the limited face-to-face classes, teachers incorporated some questions in our module that helped us reflect on our learning. Reflection questions are discussed during our face-to-face encounter.*
	Self-directed Learning	Independent Learning	*The limited face-to-face learning helped us learn at our own pace since 50% of our classes were modular while the remaining 50% were face-to-face.*
	Self - Regulated Learning	Motivating	*Our teachers' modules motivate through pictures and localizing examples in our community. Our teachers asked some questions regarding the modules in our face-to-face classes.*
		Promotes curiosity	*Most of our modules in the College of Education were interactive. One of our instructors used some of our community experiences to deliver the lesson, which made us more curious about the lesson since we felt connected to it.*

	Motivating Instructional Strategy	*Some teachers employed teaching strategies that helped us be more motivated to learn.*
Prompt Teacher's Feedback	Teachers' entertain questions from the students	*We can ask questions to our teachers during the face-to-face classes, especially in the lessons in our modules.*
	Teachers' give feedback to students	*Our teachers gave us some oral and written feedback during our face-to-face classes.*

Table 4 shows the learning challenges that students experienced during the limited face-to-face classes at ESSU College of Education. Under the theme "learning challenges" were internet connectivity glitches and course design issues.

According to students in the limited face-to-face classes conducted by the ESSU College of education, the first learning barrier was internet connectivity glitches. Some teachers preferred to send their modules via email; hence, some students found it hard to download, especially if the files were huge. The unstable internet connections and signal disturbances were some of the students' problems since they used the internet as references for their lessons. Some students needed more resources at home; hence, the presence of the internet was essential to them. Internet connectivity problems can affect students' learning, especially in this pandemic, where students rely on the internet (Asio et al., 2021). In addition, the geographic locations of students in rural areas affected their learning. Thus, the students' location must be considered in crafting policies for blended learning during the pandemic (Cullinan, Flannery, Harold, Lyons, & Palcic, 2021).

Course design issues were one of the categories under the theme "learning challenges". Students were confused about course schedules during the first two weeks of classes since teachers and students were adjusting to the new schedules and because it was the first time in two years that limited face-to-face classes were conducted at the university. Moreover, there is no unity in how teachers gave their modules; some preferred to send their modules online, and some opted to provide hard copies of the modules. Assuring instructional design is essential to a successful teaching and learning process. Therefore, the course design policy of the school must be observed by all students and teachers (Liu, Chen, & Pugh, 2021).

Table 4. Learning challenges during the limited face-to-face classes

Theme	Categories	Subcategories	Initial Codes
	Internet connectivity glitches	Unstable Internet connection	*Some teachers sent their modules via emails and Google classroom. Downloading of these files were sometimes affected by unstable internet connections.*
		Signal disturbances	*There were some signal disturbances from the internet connection provider in our place.*

Learning Challenges	Course design issues	Some teachers provide hard copies of modules and some were sent in the email.	*We were initially confused because some teachers opted to send copies of modules online, and some teachers preferred to distribute hard copies of modules.*
		Issues on Scheduling	*We had some course schedules that were changed in the second week of face-to-face classes.*

The students' coping mechanisms for the challenges they encountered from the limited face-to-face classes were also asked in the focus group discussion. Among the students' coping mechanisms from the challenge of "internet connectivity glitches" were relocating to places with good internet speed and asking for help from classmates. Moreover, most students go to the city proper of Borongan, Eastern Samar, Philippines, to have ample internet speed to do their activities and assignments. Internet connectivity glitches are a common problem in rural areas like the local of this study (Salac & Kim, 2016). Moreover, some students asked classmates instead to cope with the limitation

In addition, the students' coping mechanisms for their "course design issues" were asking for help from classmates and understanding the issues through peer support. Some students who are ashamed to ask questions to their teachers ask their classmates about their misconceptions about the course design. Moreover, some students do group studies at the convenience of their homes. Group study helped students to get on track with their courses (Bekkering, 2021).

Table 5 Coping mechanism of the students' challenges in Limited face-to-face classes

Theme	Categories	Subcategories	Initial Codes
Coping mechanism for Internet Connectivity Glitches	Relocating to other places with good internet speed	Went to the city proper where internet speed is good	*I usually go to the city proper to look for strong internet signal since our barangay has a poor internet speed.*
		Went to relatives with internet connectivity at home.	*We have no internet at home; that is why, I usually go to my aunt's home to do my assignments.*
	Asking help to classmates	Asking for a copy of the modules from their classmates.	*When the internet is not available in our place, I ask my classmates to send me modules or activities.*
		Asking for the help of classmates in answering some problems in the modules that need internet.	*There are some activities in some courses that need internet browsing. In order to cope with this problem, I asked my classmates about the information they had searched on the internet.*

Coping mechanism for Course Design Issues	Asking for help from classmates	Asked direct questions to the teachers regarding the course design issue	*In the face-to-face encounters with my teachers, I asked questions regarding some course issues, especially regarding submitting output deadlines.*
		Asked teachers through social media platforms or electronic mails.	*When I am at home and have concerns with my course, I send messages to my professors via messenger or email.*
	Understanding the issues through peer support	Asked questions to classmates	*Sometimes I am ashamed to approach our teacher; hence, I ask my classmates instead.*
		Invited classmates for group studies	*Some of my misconceptions about the course were rectified through group study at home or in my classmate's home*

■ CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study indicated that the limited face-to-face classes conducted at ESSU College of Education formed opportunities, challenges and coping mechanisms among its students. The limited face-to-face classes offered several affordances, such as in-depth conceptual understanding, self-directed learning, self-regulated learning, and prompt teachers' feedback. On the other hand, the challenges encountered by students were internet connectivity glitches and course design issues. From the challenges identified by the students, relocating to other places with good internet speed and asking for help from classmates were their coping mechanisms for internet connectivity glitches, while asking for help from classmates and understanding the issues through peer support were students' coping mechanisms for course design issues. The students' opportunities of limited face-to-face classes led them to succeed in their academic performance; moreover, they were able to cope with all the challenges they faced during the limited face-to-face classes.

This study recommended that the same study be conducted on the teachers' perceptions.

Determining the teaching opportunities and challenges during the limited face-to-face classes is also crucial for crafting a rigid policy. For instance, the teachers need to unite on providing modules to students, some teachers provide hard copies, and some offer soft copies. These practices need to be clarified among students and may disturb their learning.

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