BEHIND THE SCENES OF FLEXIBLE CLASSROOMS: HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS SUPPORTING PEERS

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ABSTRACT

It is a reality that the abrupt changes in the educational delivery in higher education had been challenging to all stakeholders, particularly the students. This compelled not only academic but also social support to find alternative platforms to reach out to the students amid new limitations and opportunities. Hence, this study looked into the nature of higher education students' peer support in the context of flexible learning delivery. A phenomenological design was employed and data were gathered through semi-structured individual interviews with five students. Studies found that peer support in the context of flexible learning (1) offers the same content in new platforms; (2) reinforces the cycle of support through new challenges; (3) requires sacrifice through sharing of time; and (4) builds character and competence. Online platforms provide new spaces for students to support peers, in recognition of shared struggles and adjustments in the flexible delivery mode. This is highly important for students especially as flexible learning makes new demands on the student's time and responsibility for learning. These findings could inform the HEI's development of student support policies to help perpetuate this culture of peer support for mutual success.

Keywords: peer support; online learning; distance learning; higher education

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic affected many aspects of social operations, particularly in education (Coman et al, 2020). With mobility restrictions and health concerns, the wisdom of opening classes in the past academic year had been questioned by many stakeholders. Nonetheless, education managed to push through by finding flexible delivery options to reach its target learners. The higher education sector, however, reiterates that flexible learning pertains to the offering of learning with the flexible arrangement in terms of time, space, and audience and is not limited to technology-based modalities. The higher education sector encouraged institutions to identify the learning delivery modality that would be most suitable to their contexts (CHEd, 2020, Tria, 2020).

These flexible options, however, still had to deal with challenges such as the economic status of students resulting in limited resources (Tria, 2020), and short preparation time due to its abrupt nature. Another issue that is often raised is internet connectivity. As emphasized by Coman, et al., (2020), even though internet-based learning is only an option, it has become a vital element for HEIs to sustain its operations during the pandemic. Further, it has to be noted that regardless of the mode of delivery of the institution, flexible learning changes more than just the where and how of education, as it alters "who" has a greater

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responsibility to student learning. As Zawacki-Richter, (2004) indicated, resorting to distance delivery would require a shift of responsibility to the students (Sinclair, 2017). However, with the abrupt nature of change, students had to embrace this paradigm shift in great haste, making it quite a challenge.

Bongco and Ama's recent study on intergenerational communication among HEI faculty and students shows that learners turn to their peers for support at this time of flexible learning because it is where they could find help without fear of being misinterpreted. In fact, group chats with classmates become a space where students could fill their need for relationships with peers, especially if the said groups do not include the faculty who tend to make them feel anxious for possible misunderstandings. Existing literature shows that peers who are "equal" share social similarities (Penney, 2018). These shared experiences allow individuals to provide support, encouragement and hope to others who are in the same conditions (Gulliver & Byrom, 2014). Sinclair (2017) indicated that it is ideal to encourage peer support because it is one of the keys to successful online learning. Peer support could be informal or a peer-run program. It could also be one-on-one or group support (Gulliver & Byrom, 2014).

There have been studies on peer support in the online context such as that of Sinclair (2017) which looked into the importance of peer support in e-learning. However, it has to be recognized that most of these studies are situated in the context of flexible, distance, or online learning where students have some level of control or choice to enroll in this particular mode, especially as universities offer multiple pathways for students to pursue education (Gillett-Swan, 2017). It could be assumed that these students who opt for flexible modality have prepared for this learning, especially in terms of required resources. In the case of the current study, however, students have very slim choices which are further narrowed down by their geographical location, and socio-economic status, among other factors. Hence, it could be said that students' conditions in this pandemic-induced-flexible learning modality are different in terms of choice, readiness, and resources. As such, this paper explored the nature of peer support among higher education students in the context of flexible learning in the time of the pandemic. Findings could inform HEI's development of student support policies to help perpetuate this culture of peer support for mutual success.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study aimed to describe the nature of peer support during flexible learning in HEI, amid the pandemic. Specifically, its research objectives were:
1. identify the nature of peer support during flexible learning in HEI;
2. describe the process by which peer support was provided; and
3. describe the effects of peer support among involved students.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed phenomenological design to surface the essence of the experiences of HEI students in accessing and providing peer support in the context of flexible learning. The selection of participants, data collection, validation, and analysis will be discussed at length in the succeeding paragraphs.

The study invited the participation of students through the social network rather than through the institution for better anonymity. Criterion-based sampling was used in the selection of five participants. The study's inclusion criteria are as follows: (1) They should be higher education students, (2) who were enrolled during the shift to the flexible delivery mode in 2020-2021. Table 1 shows the summary of the participants.

Table 1
Summary of participants in terms of age and sex.

Participant	Sex	Age
Participant 1	Female	20
Participant 2	Male	22
Participant 3	Male	25
Participant 4	Female	29
Participant 5	Male	20

Participants gave their voluntary consent to participate in the study. Setting of interviews took

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into consideration the student's schedules. Their anonymity and the confidentiality of data were also assured among the participants.

Data were collected using semi-structured individual interviews. The interview questionnaire was subjected to a two-phase validation. Phase one validation involved the expert review in terms of the relevance of the interview questions with the research question. Four expert validators in higher education confirmed the relevance of the first draft of interview questions with minor suggestions regarding the phrasing of one question and the addition of one preliminary interview question. Phase two validation involved pilot testing with a 20-year-old student. The purpose of pilot testing is to check the instrument in terms of the level of difficulty, clarity, and facilitation requirements. Finally, nine interview questions were identified. Sample interview questions are:

- What kind of support or assistance do you wish to receive from your peers?
- In what ways do you feel the support of your peers in online learning?
- What are your reasons for offering this support to your peers?

Online interviews were scheduled and recorded, with the participants' consent. Said interviews were facilitated in English or Filipino, whichever language would allow the participants to better express their realities on the phenomenon of concern.

The validity of data is essential in qualitative studies. In this particular research, validity was established from the perspective of the participants, by returning the interview transcripts which were transcribed in verbatim form.

This process was done by returning a copy of verbatim transcript with line numbers and a validation sheet in google form. This allowed the participants to delete, clarify, add, or alter any part of the transcript. Participants confirmed the validity of the transcripts without needed alterations. Only Participant 5 gave an addition to the transcript that was validated. Additional responses were included in the data analysis.

Verbatim transcript was subjected to two-phase coding to minimize the risk of losing meaning in translation. Only the illustrative statements were translated to English for the final write-up. For anonymity. Participants were coded participants 1 to 5 from the recordings to analysis and final write-up.

Transcripts were read initially to identify preliminary sets of open codes for initial analysis. Significant statements were identified and coded using descriptive codes. A total of 37 open codes (e.g. comfort, asking for help, updates, pay forward) were generated for further classification into categories. Second cycle coding clustered codes into 9 categories which provided the basis for the articulation of 4 major themes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Peer-Support among HEI Students in Flexible Learning

Table 2
Summary of Codes

Category	Code	Statements	Cases	% Cases
Builds competence	Lack of Confidence	4	2	40.0%
Builds competence	Capacitating self	1	1	20.0%
Builds competence	Inadequacy	1	1	20.0%
Builds competence	Capability	1	1	20.0%
Builds character	Pride	1	1	20.0%
Builds character	Receiver's Attitude	3	1	20.0%
Builds character	Withdrawal	2	2	40.0%
Builds character	Sympathy	3	2	40.0%
Builds character	Concern	5	3	60.0%
Builds character	Empathy	4	3	60.0%
Requires sacrifice	Time	3	2	40.0%
Requires sacrifice	Exhausting	3	1	20.0%
Requires sacrifice	Connectivity	1	1	20.0%
Requires sacrifice	Expectations	4	1	20.0%
Cycle of support	Pay forward	6	3	60.0%
Cycle of support	Mutual Need	3	2	40.0%
Cycle of support	Reciprocity	6	4	80.0%
Cycle of support	Appreciation for concern	6	3	60.0%
Cycle of support	Directions of support	4	4	80.0%
Cycle of support	Offer to help	7	3	60.0%
Cycle of support	Asking for help	1	1	20.0%
Platforms	Messaging	4	2	40.0%
Platforms	Calls	2	2	40.0%
Emotional	Comfort	5	4	80.0%
Emotional	Emotional	5	2	40.0%
Emotional	Encouragement	10	4	80.0%
Emotional	Sounding board	2	2	40.0%
Emotional	Checking	2	2	40.0%
Emotional	Understanding	5	1	20.0%
Spiritual	Spiritual Support	1	1	20.0%
Financial	Financial	3	1	20.0%
Learning	Lesson activities	3	3	60.0%
Learning	Peer Tutoring	2	2	40.0%
Learning	Sharing resources	8	4	80.0%
Learning	Updates	4	1	20.0%
Learning	Guidance	11	5	100.0%

1.1. Same Content in New Platforms

Students offer and receive different forms of support from their peers. These include spiritual,

emotional, information, and even financial. Participants admit, however, that relationships with others affect the kind of support that they offer to or receive from peers. As Participant 5 emphasized, "It depends on our relationship. Let's say we are just casual classmates, then. there won't be too much conversation. I would just answer the question. But if it is a friend, close friend (we say), 'do you already have an output for this or that subject?' There is love…"

The flexible mode of delivery shifted more responsibility to the students who are expected to manage their time and learn through learning modules. This new norm raised the need for students for more informational and instrumental support in terms of confirmation of understanding and instructions for tasks, among others. In some instances, students (particularly Dean's Listers or class representatives) lead group study or peer tutoring with other students to help them accomplish some task or prepare for examinations. The need for informational support is also vital due to the poor internet connections, and economic struggles of some students. Through their peers, students manage to access updates and lectures from synchronous discussions when connecting becomes a challenge. Below are some illustrations from participants.

> Participant 1: "There were times that we reviewed Discord. There are sudden study sessions. For instance, when there is an exam, someone would just sends a link. We have a classmate who will guide or who will review us on the topics that will be covered."

> Participant 4: "…someone asked me about lesson plans, so I shared all the references that were saved in my laptop. 'This is what we used before…'"

Further, students also access financial support through their peers. Participant 4 also shared, "I only rely on data ever since the pandemic. When I don't have a load, I will chat with them, 'Guys, I don't have load.' Sometimes, they would send me a mobile load so I could join the online class."

Other important support that students receive from peers are emotional in nature such as encouragement, and comfort. The stress in flexible learning is eased by the support from other students. Participant 5 shared, "Friends cheer me, help me, and love me for all the times (especially breakdowns). They also cherish every moment I succeeded." Similarly, Participant 4 feels the concern of peers when they check on her during her inactivity in an online class, "…sometimes, when I don't check messages (in class), they would text me in my number and (ask) 'Is there a problem?'… 'How can we help you?'" The same participant also admitted that she was deeply encouraged by the spiritual support given by peers. "…and my group are very spiritual people. They always share verses."

Social support as a psychosocial resource that is made available to an individual through his/her social network comes in different types including emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support (Kocalevent et al., 2018; Melicki & Kilpatrick Demaray, 2003). Students in the flexible learning mode are also able to access these resources. Only, these resources are accessed remotely (Gulliver-Byrom, 2014) through calls and messaging due to the limitations of the pandemic. These remote modalities of providing and accessing support provide ease through the availability of multiple routes to connect with others. However, it also provides some challenges due to issues such as connectivity and affordability.

The shift to the flexible learning mode compelled a paradigm shift that expects students to be more responsible and accountable for their learning. With the perturbative nature of the recent exodus to the flexible learning modalities, this shift had been overwhelming for the students. Adding to this is the lack of immediate feedback because instructors are not always readily available to answer them (Yusuf & Al-Banawi, 2013, as cited by Coman et al, 2020). As such, students turn to one of the accessible sources of support, namely, their peers.

The stress of embracing more responsibility over one's learning, coupled with circumstances that are beyond their control (e.g. poor internet connection) (Yusuf & Al-Banawi, 2013, as cited by Coman et al, 2020), as well as the feeling of isolation due to mobility restrictions also places great value on the emotional support

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that students access remotely. It is notable, however, that the support that students access from and offer to peers is influenced by them being an outsider (ibang tao) or one-of-us (hindi ibang tao), which determines the kinds of interaction one engages in (Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000, Macapagal et al., 2013). For instance, outsiders whose interactions are limited to civility to go along with, are more likely to exchange information rather than deep emotional support.

1.2. Cycle of Support Reinforced by New Challenges

One of the basic reasons for providing support to peers is concern and empathy. However, another rationale for reaching out to each other is the recognition of mutual needs. This feeling could be reinforced by new challenges that come with flexible learning such as the poor internet connection and more independent learning. As such, students extend support as a form of investment, to ensure that when the situations are reversed, someone would help them.

> Participant 1: "I have experienced a failed wifi connection and I don't have data. I was lost. But when the wifi was restored, I just found that someone sent a file. Someone sent a summary of the prof's discussion. It was a mutual sharing. That was when I realized that I needed to help them…. I only experienced that once, but what about the others who struggle with a connection through mobile data."

Receiving peer support in any form does not only elicit gratitude from the recipients. It also inspires the desire to pay it forward. Participant 3 shared, "…I've been receiving the same … encouragement from other people so, maybe, I adopted that. I shared it with other friends who needed those words of wisdom and encouragement" Further, paying it forward is promoted because of the generational directions in some of the peer support. Younger students who belong to lower year levels are less likely to offer course-related support to older and high-year students. Hence, if they feel the need to return the favor, their common recourse is to help out those who are younger than them, and thus perpetuate the support cycle.

> Participant 2: "I think to pay for that, I need to help those who are younger than I who ask for my help. They didn't hold back from helping me, so would I be selfish, right? We can't just take, and we can't also just give."

> Participant 4: "Because there were people who helped us. For example, in lesson planning. Before, there were the fourth-year students… So now, it is our turn to help our juniors…"

As indicated by the findings of Erdmann, Estrada-Presedo, & de Miguel-Valdés (2021), distance learning due to the pandemic highlighted digital, as well as the social divide. The social differences among students became more evident. And with the distance learning setup, its effects on education became even more direct. However, even though some students are at a social advantage, challenges due to technical aspects and bulk work had been generally experienced, in contrast to the findings of Chugaia & Svyrydovaa (2022) of technology university students in Ukraine.

The struggle to adapt to the disruptive change in education provided a common experience that solidified learners with their peers. This shared experience and need set the ground for peer support to operate. Moreover, recognition of the new challenges in the flexible learning mode which could hinder their learning further reinforce this engagement. For instance, despite the Philippine Commission on Higher Education's (2020) clarification that flexible learning is not limited to the use of technology, all participants still required the use of online modalities as they engage in more independent learning with their learning modules. Hence, they try to find every possible way to "plug in" to 'connections" to understand the modules (Siemens, 2005). These "connections'' include their peers who are easily accessible through online platforms. This persistence to connect for learning takes the students back to the problem that flexible learning modality intended to minimize, which is the poor internet connections and socio-economic status of students (Tria, 2020). Further, in addition to

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inequality issues that pose challenges to students, some concerns could disrupt learning even for students with adequate resources such as large and low-scale brownouts (Rey, 2011), poor internet connection (Tria, 2020), and weather conditions.

Meanwhile, as described by Penney (2018) and Gulliver and Byrom (2014) reciprocity or mutuality is inherent in peer support. Hence, students are challenged to return the favor to peers one way or another. This urge is especially important among Filipinos due to the value of utang na loob (dept of gratitude) (Macapagal, et al., 2013). However, this reciprocity is not limited to each other but to extended peers by "paying it forward" or general reciprocity (Gray et al. 2014). This practice leads to a more continuous cycle of support among peers.

1.3. Sacrifice through Sharing of Time

Offering support requires sharing of time. However, as the HEI shifted to the flexible delivery mode, time became a very important resource especially as students are adjusting to the new norms, and embracing more responsibility for his/her learning. Hence, sharing time to support peers often requires sacrifice from students.

This is especially true with some guardians' potential lack of understanding of the nature of flexible learning. Participant 2 shared, "Especially now that we are just at home. With online learning, parents assume that students are not doing anything. They just come to class online, do modules…" Similarly, Participant 1 shared that her parents who are fully supportive of her learning and allow her to focus on her studies also have the same misunderstanding of flexible learning mode. She explained:

"In an online class, even if we have control over our time, we could still not avoid when parents order us to do this or do that, 'since you're not doing anything.' For them, only the discussions are considered classes. If there are no discussions, they think that there is no class so you shouldn't be doing anything. 'What are you doing there in front of your laptop?' My parents were like that so I struggled."

Nonetheless, students still find time to support their peers. Participant 2 shared "During that time, especially in research, I offer time in the evening to help them in research, especially those who were scared of research. I offer them my 8 to 12. Sometimes, even until 2 PM." Similarly, Participant 5 shared the experience of reaching out to peers, "I check with them, 'Hey, are you okay?" Then I would check if they are okay or not."

Further, students, especially those who were designated to leadership roles (e.g. class representatives) reach the point where they are exhausted. As Participant 1 shared, "…for two semesters this year, I had been the class representative. I was the one who guided all of them, so at the end of the sem, I felt drained." Despite her concern and desire to help her peers, experiencing these down moments lead the student to feel "worthless" knowing that she was expected to help her peers. The pressure of her designation increases her frustration and feeling of failure in such instances.

Flexible learning involves flexibility in mode and place, as well as time (CHED 2020). This is in recognition that as the responsibility for learning shifts more to the learners, diversity in learners' abilities and resources must be taken into consideration. Hence, even with online delivery, many universities make it a point to provide both synchronous and asynchronous activities.

While both are important, asynchronous is more supportive of self-paced and independent learning, unlike synchronous which is more teacher-directed (Murphy et al., 2011). However, it could also be more demanding for the students. Nonetheless, as a product of the traditional educational system, many parents fail to recognize the equal value of these two components. With the misconception of parents, along with the current study-from-home set-up, students are challenged to accomplish their asynchronous activities within the family's expectations. This makes the time a more valuable resource for students. Hence, while sharing time is natural in offering peer support, sharing time during this period requires sacrifice for many students.

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1.4. Character and Competence Building

The process of giving requires capacitating oneself. Hence, the desire or the duty of rendering peer support compels students to prepare themselves by studying ahead of time. This is possible with the nature of the flexible learning mode which provides the students the freedom to manage their learning and their time. Participant 1 shared, "… I work on my modules as soon as they are given so if they (my classmates) need any help, I would know how to help them because I am already done with the module."

Further, it also builds character. First, it promotes the values of giving and empathy for others. As participants receive kindness and support, they recognize the value of sharing the same support to help others. Participant 5 shared, "…I don't want anyone to be left behind. I mean, we are all suffering… who would want much stress in light, right? So (1) remind them that 'Oh you're doing great"

Participant 1: "I don't have much problem because I don't have much responsibility at home. My parents really wanted me to focus on my studies, so as much as possible, if I could help others who have multiple responsibilities, then why not help them so we could all succeed."

Further, it also promotes humility and accepting support. As participants' statements suggest, accepting peer support requires letting go of one's "pride" and admitting that one needs some help or support from another. Only with such acceptance will the students be able to fully appreciate the benefits of peer support.

This finding is consistent with the assertions of Gulliver & Byrom (2014) that peer support does not only benefit the person receiving the support but also the one giving it. The receiver benefits from empowerment, empathy and acceptance, hope, and motivation. Meanwhile, people offering support also benefit in the form of empowerment and self-esteem. It was also notable how a person who receives support realizes the value of kindness offered at a time of need and thus inspiring him/her to extend the same kindness to others. Further, in terms of learning, students who teach others through peer tutoring or by leading study groups could also benefit with better retention due to their engagement in more active role in learning as emphasized in Edgar Dale's Cone of Experience (Bilbao, et al., 2015)

CONCLUSIONS

The abrupt process by which the education sector had to shift from the face-to-face set-up to flexible learning compelled students to cope with the changes in haste. The shift did not only change the spaces for accessing learning but also the responsibility and norms, thus compelling students to find support among peers who share their experiences and struggles. One of the study's main contributions to peer support literature is its finding that the abrupt paradigm shift led students to turn more to their peers for more empathic and immediate information, and instrumental, emotional, and spiritual support. Further is the complexity in use and sharing of time amid the misunderstanding of flexible learning mode among the students' families. At this point, even after passing through the transition period, learning at all levels and in all forms is expected to be challenging, which makes peer support indispensable regardless of the platform through which it is conveyed. However, simply because this informal peer support happened naturally without intervention does not mean that the academe could not do anything to support the process. It has been noted that peer support could also be exhausting and frustrating, especially for students who are officially designated to the role. Further, the process requires acceptance of help from other students. Designing services to address these challenges allows the academe to support the process without being intrusive of the spaces where students feel safe and free to support each other.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the conclusions, the following recommendations are given:

1. Raise awareness of the mutual needs and benefits that drive peer support. Students need to realize that accepting support is not an indication of weakness but a reflection of community living;
2. Reduce the burden of designated students officers to whom most of their peers turn to for inquiry and support by distributing tasks; and
3. Support and legitimize safe academic online spaces where students could support each other.

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