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# Challenges and Benefits of Facilitating Online Learning in Time of Covid-19 Pandemic: Insights and Experiences of Social Science Teachers

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**Abstract.** Online education is a rapidly growing phenomenon for teachers. With the outbreak of COVID-19, there are changes in all societies worldwide, and a forcible shift in the medium of teaching and learning is inevitable. This paper explored the social science teachers' lived experiences in a Chinese school during the COVID-19 Pandemic. This qualitative study utilized the phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of eight full-time and tenured social science teachers determined using purposive sampling. The data were collected from the participants using an in-depth semi-structured interview. Meanwhile, the recursive textual analysis guided by the three C's of Lichtman was employed to analyze the data thematically. The findings show that social science teachers faced challenges in online teaching such as personal, technical, and teaching strategies. It also found that the teachers have difficulty motivating students to participate in the online class activities and submission of outputs. Despite the challenges, the teachers were able to surmount the difficulties because of the support of the administration and their fellow teachers. Generally, the unfolding of online teaching challenges confronted by school heads, teachers, and students will make them resilient to adapt and embrace virtual education.

**Keywords.** Social Science, online education, COVID-19 Pandemic, phenomenology, Philippines

## 1. Introduction

Social science has had a relatively brief and turbulent history as one of the core subjects in the school curriculum. The fundamental content of the social science curriculum is the study of human enterprise across space and time. However, it has always been at the core of educational endeavors [43]. Although curriculum content has been challenged, altered, and restructured in other disciplines, the focus of social science education has undergone drastic changes over the past 150 years due to political and social influences. Within disciplines, the pedagogy has been more often challenged than the content, which is largely based upon the academic knowledge base of the discipline [44]. As in other countries like Spain, social science continues to be a classroom instructional challenge for schools, teachers, and global citizens [45].

While the world is evolving, the social science subject may remain, but teaching the learners to understand the essence of social science in schools during the pandemic is more challenging [46]. Online education is a rapidly growing phenomenon. With the outbreak of COVID-19,

there are changes in all societies worldwide, and a forcible shift in the medium of teaching and learning is inevitable [1]. Like many educational institutions worldwide, a regular start to the first semester of 2020 quickly turned into something extraordinary [18]. As debates around the quality of online versus face-to-face (F2F) teaching and learning have swayed back and forth over many years, a tiny virus so small that it could not be seen came along and caused the COVID-19 pandemic, forcing entire school systems into a lockdown situation constrained teaching and learning to online only for many countries [42]

Congruent with today's computing advancements, the rise of telecommuters, the expansion of social networking, the proliferation of virtual communities, enormous growth in the number and scope of online classes in the academe and the explosive growth of online education were seen [27]. Also, the contemporary technological context and the COVID-19 Pandemic affected the fiscal lives of institutions of education, and teachers across countries made online classes challenging to resist, especially the social science teachers. Colleges and universities see online education as an effective means for sustaining growth [47]. There is also growing evidence of the cost-effectiveness of online learning as courses can be developed, copied, and reused by other instructors, allowing for significant cost efficiencies and, to some extent, quality control [41].

COVID-19 Pandemic, as declared by the World Health Organization, has disrupted classes around the globe, including the Philippines. Students and teachers face challenges in instructional delivery due to unprepared situations caused by the decision of the Philippine government for community quarantine and the closure of the educational institutions [31]. This closure has affected more than 1.2 billion learners worldwide, with more than 28 million learners in the Philippines [38]. Online education is the response to community lockdown and community quarantine that have led students and teachers to study and work from home, leading to the delivery of online learning platforms [11]. Chinese schools in China announced to vigorously support information-based education and teaching and enhance the platform's service capacity to support online teaching [48]. The online classroom has also become a necessary way to maintain normal teaching order. With their knowledge of information technology advancement, Chinese schools in the Philippines are more ready to adopt the new normal in online education [49].

It has been a challenging period for all teachers all around the world. Suddenly, and because of something totally beyond control, students are learning remotely, and both educators and administrators are in the endless search of new tools and paths to face challenges they have not faced before [8]. Social science teachers, in particular are not spared by this current global crisis. However, the implementation of online learning posed different risks, problems, and challenges to the teachers like personal, technical, and teachers' readiness [37] [48]. However, with this crisis came a solution to these new challenges that appeared with COVID-19 and a unique opportunity to look at things from a brighter perspective [22].

The COVID-19 Pandemic brought frightening headlines. Each day dawned with news highlighting the number of cases and deaths. One of the few positives was the speed at which many global partners joined to battle the disease [16]. Academic researchers and even academic journals joined in the fight. Hence, as researchers were making early discoveries, they had a way to bypass a traditionally longer review and publication process to give hope, share building blocks, and encourage collaboration. Individuals each heard and saw success stories in responding to the pandemic and emergency online education at the preservice teacher education and the in-service teacher professional development [20]. However, these 'stories' were not heard. In this light, the researcher intended to explore the lived experiences of the social science teachers in a Chinese school in online education during this COVID-19 Pandemic. At this stage

in the research, the lived experiences of social sciences teachers in online education were generally defined as challenging and rewarding tasks to enhance quality distance learning.

## **2. Method**

The warranted methodological orientation of this study is qualitative, where research becomes interpretative and naturalistic [12]. Through a qualitative approach, researchers understand how individuals learn and make sense of themselves and give meaning to their lives [50]. Specifically used was the phenomenological approach to describe participants' lived experiences in teaching social science in this time of the pandemic, which concerns understanding its meaning [21]. It also hopes to understand the essential "truths" of the lived experiences and thoroughly investigate their respective intrinsic situations [5].

The participants were determined using purposive sampling. They were chosen through these enforced criteria: (1) should be full-time teachers in social science in elementary and junior high school; (2) tenured teachers with 5 years or more in service; (3) have taken distance learning training and could articulate their experiences well; (4) have been given loads for online teaching this school year 2020-2021; and (5) should be graduates of Bachelor of Science in Education major in Social Science.

The data were collected from the participants using an in-depth semi-structured interview; phenomenological studies primarily rely on in-depth interviews to collect data [25]. The in-depth phenomenological interviews are "directed to the participant's experiences, feelings, beliefs, and convictions about the phenomenon" [39]. Data were obtained about how the participants "think and feel in the most direct ways."

The collection of data was done through semi-structured interviews. The in-depth interviews were conducted face-to-face among selected participants. Before the interview, the researcher prepared the guide for the interview protocol and explained the purpose of the research, the time duration of the interview, the style of the interview, emphasizing the content, confidentiality, consent, and recording methods, and the use of the data. The researcher read the interview protocol before the proper interview began. The interviews were conducted individually and privately. During the interview, participants were advised to state their responses in a language they are comfortable with to express their thoughts clearly. Moreover, the researcher asked follow-up questions for probing so that the participants could elaborate or explain their ideas or answers fully. The responses were electronically recorded, and some important points were written down. The interview ended with explaining or informing the participants of the purpose of the study and of the plan to present the data to the professional community. The researcher also assured the participants about the strict observance of confidentiality regarding the interviewee's identity and responses. Thus, their anonymity was emphasized. Lastly, the researcher expressed his gratitude and appreciation to the interviewees for their generous participation in this academic endeavor. The researcher immediately checked, reviewed, and transcribed the data in preparation for analysis.

Meanwhile, the recursive textual analysis guided by the three C's of Lichtman was employed to analyze the data thematically. All interviews were audio-recorded with permission from the participants and were subsequently transcribed and analyzed. Thematic analysis was performed to unearth themes emanating from their narratives. Findings were conveyed to selected participants for validation. They have consequently concurred with the study results.

To address ethical issues, the researcher requested the consent of the participants for their voluntary participation in the study; they were informed that they have the right to withdraw. Also, the researcher ensured the participants that access to the data is solely by the researcher and would be utilized for the study only. No information that discloses their identity would be

released or published without their specific consent to the disclosure. The materials that contained the primary information derived from them would be appropriately stored and protected so that no one could access them except the researcher. Eventually, the raw and electronic were disposed of accordingly after data processing within a given period. The health and safety of the participants and the researcher in this time of the Pandemic are paramount. Since the researcher gathered the data through a face-to-face interview in school, the participants and the researcher adhered to the Department of Education Order number 14 series of 2020 [13] or guidelines of required health standards in school. The specific guidelines like observing social distancing, sanitization, temperature test, contact tracing, wearing a face mask, and a face shield were strictly observed.

### **3. Results**

The goal of the paper was to explore the lived experiences of social science teachers of a Chinese school in online education during the COVID-19 Pandemic. This section has identified two main themes, namely, challenging teaching work and rewarding tasks, to facilitate the discussion. Each theme has sub-themes that specifically describe the participants' lived experiences in online education during the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### **3.1. Challenging teaching task**

Most of the participants believe that online education is a challenging teaching task. It poses a lot of effort and training to equip teachers with skills for this new learning modality. Amid the coronavirus pandemic, many teachers opted to pivot their instruction online. The shift to online education is considered the new normal, and it is relatively challenging for it requires lots of patience, diligence, technical training, and comprehensive planning of instructional strategy.

**Personal.** The participants shared the same sentiments that online education is a surprising breakthrough in the learning process that they never expected. With the devastating situation worldwide, education is one of the most affected areas and thrown into disarray by the coronavirus. The teachers believe that their anxiety came from being forced to teach their students from home and make the best of a bad situation. Many of them are worried and anxious because it is new, and they are afraid to commit mistakes in handling the class online. They are worried if they could facilitate the class well because they used to teach face-to-face; they are also puzzled by their own fears of relevance and effectiveness. Surprisingly, one participant mentioned that her stress came from the complaints of the parents. Most of them recognized their difficulty in handling the online class at the start of the school year but later affirmed the joy of surviving the struggles.

*"Teaching in the midst of a pandemic is not easy, it was my first time to teach online...."*

*"For me, online teaching is not just a difficult task, but it can be considered a challenging one...."*

*"It is difficult because you cannot see your students face to face..."*

*"At first, I was confused and not comfortable with this kind of system because this is my first time handling the class...."*

*"I felt exhausted and scared – mixed emotions... It's challenging to be patient..."*

*"For almost a month, I experienced sleepless nights thinking, and my online experience was kind of stressful in the beginning...."*

**Technical.** It is also important to remember that most teachers are not digital natives or digitally inclined, and many of them are not proficient in using and working with unfamiliar software. The initial onboarding sentiments of the teachers were their capabilities and skills in handling the class using gadgets, the learning management system (LMS), and the internet. Most of the participants were struggling because it was the first time they facilitated the class online. Some of them are considered tenured but are not techie. However, the teachers are thankful because the school assigned technical staff to help them when they encountered technical problems. They also explored technical instructions from Youtube.

*"I find it difficult to facilitate sometimes especially if there are technical problems...."*  
*"There are some glitches in the technical aspects...."*

*"The online checking of the tasks in the LMS can sometimes drain our eyes...."*

*"I am struggling to implement online lessons because I am not a techie...."*

*"At first, I was hesitant, worried, and anxious because I am not in technology...."*

**Pedagogical.** The common struggles of teachers in terms of delivering the lessons online were the lack of connection and their ability to communicate and deliver the appropriate lessons effectively. The participants agreed that they have to be creative, plan the lesson with varied teaching styles, utilize interactive LMS, and use accessible learning materials or resources and appropriate assessment. To facilitate the students' learning outcomes in online education effectively, some teachers diligently guided and supported the students in doing the tasks from start to finish. Aside from verbal instructions, the teachers should translate necessary guidelines into crystal clear written materials or documents that all learners could access and understand. This is one of the primary struggles of the teachers in online education.

*"I have to be creative in making my online materials so that students will not get bored...."*

*"I have to create activities like partner reporting so that students' participation can be maximized...."*

*"It is a challenge to think of interactive pedagogy to facilitate the class well because, in an online class, you need to be connected with constant communication...."*

*"At first, the struggle was real because we need to prepare a lot of things modules, PowerPoint, formative test, and of course, Moodle (LMS)."*

*"I need to navigate and familiarize with (LMS) Moodle so that I could make good learning materials...."*

*"The strategies I am using are personalized learning, using chatbox to answer their queries, and recitation in order to maximize the students' participation...."*

### **3.2. Online Education is a Rewarding Task**

The most satisfying experience of a teacher in the learning process is the joy of teaching and transforming lives. Most participants in this study were able to identify the challenges in online education and were grateful because more than the struggles, they found the job as a vocation and more rewarding at the same time. Although the online teaching experiences of the teachers were difficult and work-intensive, most of them acknowledged that the teaching ministry gave them some satisfaction. Various factors related to the type of satisfaction that participants identified, but they highlighted the three significant stakeholders who helped them persevere and work harder as teachers of online education. The participants were able to recognize the support of the administration, collaboration with their co-teachers, and gratifying students' feedbacks.

**Support from the administration.** The school administrators work hand in hand with the teachers. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, the school immediately planned for possible online education for the incoming school year. As online education was gradually institutionalized this year, the administrators played a vital role in the success of the school program for distance learning. The participants shared the same ideas and experiences on the support and guidance of the administration. Some participants are grateful for the kindness and compassion of the bosses in school because they provided training and conferences, reasonable schedules, and accessibility of online learning materials to equip teachers in the new normal of education. They even provided technical staff to cater to all teachers' difficulties and purchased a learning management system to help teachers in their lessons online. The entire participants considered their administrators as gifts during this pandemic crisis.

*"I am thankful for the support of the administration by providing for our needs and well-planned class schedules...."*

*"I am so grateful to our school administrators because they did not abandon us during this time of Pandemic...."*

*"The school equipped us with the knowledge about what to do during online classes and how to use our computer/laptop in the class...."*

*"The good feedback and affirmation from my area head give joy and enthusiasm...."*

**Collaborative work.** As online education might be hard for the teachers, it is likely even harder for the tenured teachers who are not inclined and used to this new modality of teaching online. Collaboration is one of the important skills of 21<sup>st</sup>-century learners and is also the key to achieve team teaching in this time of COVID-19 Pandemic on the part of the teachers. The participants found solace from their co-teachers in times of difficulty handling online classes. Strong collaborations with co-teachers enhanced support systems to make the job easy for all. The participants were so grateful to their co-teachers, who helped them all the time. Some participants mentioned that they also volunteered to assist particular colleagues with their difficulties in the online class. The action was satisfying and rewarding.

*"I am blessed to have colleagues who are so supportive and helpful to assist me with my difficulties in the online classes...."*

*"I admit I am not computer literate, but I asked help from my colleagues and they helped...."*

*"I coped up with my struggle to learn to do teaching online because of the team efforts in my Social Science department..."*

*"I collaborate with my fellow teachers; helping one another is gratifying and inspiring...."*

**Appreciation from the students.** The most important feedback a teacher can get is from his or her students. Having the mind to facilitate a classroom community that is a bunch of personalities is truly affirming. Students' feedbacks are more important than anybody else's, which the participants reiterated. They shared the same insights that students appreciating their efforts is the most rewarding feeling of all. Cliché as it may sound, but "Thank You" from the students after the online classes are the most satisfying words. Some are so happy to know that the students were attentive in class and did their tasks well.

*"I am happy to hear students thanking me after the online class, saying 'Thank you, mam'...."*

*"I feel satisfied after guiding students to do their online tasks...."*

*"I appreciate the participation of students in my online class especially when I asked them to share their thoughts..."*

*"It is rewarding when students thank you because they were given chances to do their tasks...."*

#### **4. Discussion**

The results of the study yielded many significant insights about the lived experiences of social science teachers in a Chinese school in online education. The participants were able to highlight two important experiences in online education. First, online education faces many challenges. Teachers' abilities to teach online are critical to the quality of online education [24]. Based on this phenomenological study, three dominant challenges were identified: personal, technical, and pedagogical.

The participants acknowledged that online education also required intense affective effort. There is a need to be more accepting, grounded with one's own feelings, and attentive to emotionally engage with students because it is hard to be personal online [10]. In an online environment, impersonal and personal experiences are described as the ones that lack immediate feedback, thorough self-examination, relevance to the learners, efforts during the delivery of instructions, and formal communication.

Technical skill is one of the most pressing concerns in online education. Teachers should be given enough training to meet the demands of facilitating online classes. The participants reiterated the importance of technical mastery for effective online learning. The teachers recognized that they have to be equipped with the online learning tools, features, a learning management system (LMS), or troubleshoot technical problems. This particular challenge in the technical aspect was addressed by the school technical staff and teachers' efforts to watch Youtube technical instructions. Technological resources such as computers, laptops, and mobile phones used in teaching and learning activities have both constructive and destructive effects on the academic environment affecting both students and teachers [6].

Pedagogical literacy can be viewed as the capacity to identify classroom challenges and develop active, informed responses [26]. Students are not the only ones who might feel uninterested or exhausted in an online education setting. It can be a struggle for teachers, too, especially for social science teachers because the subject is content-oriented, and the students may easily get bored. When teaching requires being more creative in an online class, there is a need to rely on resources to do the job for the teacher. Interaction among students is one of the single most important elements of successful online education. Collaborative engagement motivates learning and promotes a deeper and more critically aware approach to the subject matter. Unfortunately, collaboration is one of the most challenging things to achieve when students are not physically present together [33]. The participants agreed that they have to be creative, resourceful, and active in their preparation and delivery of lessons in the online classes. They acknowledged that the interactive learning management system of the school helps them achieve learning outcomes and deliver the lessons appropriately.

The teachers acknowledged the vital role of administrators in their quest to deliver effective online education to the learners. The faculty perceived the positive impact of the administrative factors on their online teaching effectiveness and revealed five key considerations: scheduling, LMS course design, curriculum, faculty development, and the support of the heads. These factors were relevant to all faculty teaching online, and each factor had relative importance to tenured faculty [19]. Recognizing that administrators' leadership is very important in this time

of the COVID-19 Pandemic, the teachers were thankful because they felt the presence of their administrators and planned immediately to address the problem of possible online education.

Support of online faculty, including faculty development, has been explored in the context of faculty effectiveness [28]. The strong support system is deemed to be seamless in an educational environment. The teachers must come to an agreement that they will help each other in this time of crisis. The participants happily recognized the kindness of their fellow teachers. They found an ally and support through their constant collaboration and intensive planning for online education. The teachers enjoyed the partnerships and the teamwork of their department in social science, and they also acknowledged the support and mentoring skills of the subject area head.

Lastly, the most rewarding element of online education is the appreciation of the students to the teachers. The participants were greatly happy for all the positive feedbacks, appreciation, and results of the assessments of the students. The teachers believed that the students engaged in the quality, substantive, and depth of learning [33]. The teachers postulated the students' progress because they diligently supported and guided the learners from the beginning of the lessons up to make their tasks and assignments. This is one special feature that students are so grateful to their teachers. The students' direct expression of gratitude to the teachers was the most gratifying and rewarding online education experience.

The lived experiences of social science teachers in online education are both challenging and rewarding. The challenges are seen more in personal, technical, and pedagogical areas of online education. The teachers might find online teaching as a challenging teaching task, but at the same time, they may find comfort and solace from the support of the administrators and their fellow teachers. The most rewarding element of the teachers' experience is the appreciation from the students. Teachers described this as being engaged and actively involved, which helped them gradually embrace the new normal mode of facilitating learning. The entire experiences of the teachers in online education teaching social science were exigent tasks, but like an eclectic garden, it gratifies the eyes and spirit.

## **5. Conclusion**

The findings of this study revealed the two dominant themes, which are challenging teaching work and rewarding tasks, that affect social science teachers in facilitating online education. The two factors are also found in other related studies where teachers have commonly experienced in online teaching. This study can help social science teachers and heads of the department gain instructional perspectives in online education and recognize that although it may require ample time for developing, designing, planning, and preparing online instruction, it can also be a rewarding experience. Also, this study can help teachers reassess their roles in light of the type of teaching practices that one experiences while teaching online.

Generally, despite teachers' personal, technical, and pedagogical challenges in online classes, the teachers found the job rewarding because of the support of the administrators, co-teachers, and students' positive feedback. All members of online educational communities should be mindful of fostering compassion and solidarity towards the teachers. Teachers' experiences in online learning should motivate stakeholders to work harder and explore different styles of online learning activities to deliver quality Chinese education in the country. Finally, the unfolding of online teaching challenges confronting school heads, teachers, and students will make them resilient to adapt and embrace virtual education.

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