Unraveling Students' Online Collaborative Experiences in A Social Studies Classroom: A Phenomenological Inquiry

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Abstract— Online collaborative learning has the potential to keep students engaged, create a sense of community in the online learning environment, and allow them to experience and practice virtual teamwork skills. This study aimed to explore students' online collaborative experiences in a social studies classroom. This study utilized qualitative research, specifically a phenomenological approach, using the purposive sampling method. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions were used in gathering the data. The analysis of the data identified six themes in the experiences of the students toward online collaborative learning: (a) communicating with groupmates became a challenge; (b) online communication tools proved extremely useful; (c) communicating in small groups or pairs is preferred; (d) lack of gadgets and technology skills; health is affected; (e) poor signal and expensive internet fees; and (f) everyone should be accountable for the time allotted. The study's findings suggest that Higher Education Institutions/social studies instructors may formulate learners' accountability systems and provide technical skills training. Further, school administrators of higher education institutions may collaborate with telecommunication agencies via a memorandum of agreement to provide essential services and technical and load assistance to students of far-flung areas who do not have internet connectivity. This will be realized by giving the students load cards/sim cards with internet connectivity load for them to participate in online collaborative learning.

Keywords— MAED-Teaching Social Studies, online learning, online collaborative learning, social studies students, teamwork, in-depth interview, focus group discussion, Davao de Oro, Philippines.

I. INTRODUCTION

Online collaborative learning is an educational technique that allows students to study logical reasoning, learn whole curricula, and create solutions [23]. Online collaborative learning is a significant concept in higher educationrequiring students to collaborate and learn can build a range of soft skills necessaryfor success in today's team-based work environments. However, Meijer et al.[24] stated that one of the most significant challenges for teachers and students is assessingonline collaborative learning activities, ineffective communication, group conflict, and anegative attitude toward group work all offered significant challenges to online collaboration. Furthermore, online collaborative learning is difficult in an online environment. The students are sometimes hesitant and disappointed in collaborative approaches, primarily while operating in small online communities, since they struggle tocreate a sense of connectedness inside various online teams [17].

In Singapore, Pang et al. [27] reported the challenges in online collaborative learning of Secondary School students. The results showed that students expressed dissatisfaction with online collaborative learning. When asked to reflect on theircollaborative learning experiences, students shared a disturbing concern that memberswere "uncooperative" or "lame" and that they would instead "get it over and done with."The emphasis on cooperation over collaborative learning showed an inability to build social competence when students chose to avoid or blame rather than engage another team member.

In the Philippines, the higher education institutions (HEIs) shift to modified forms of online learning aims to strengthen the government's commitment to continuing education in the face of the pandemic. The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) of the Philippines advised HEIs to continue using accessible, flexible learning and other alternative modes of delivery instead of on-campus teaching to promote lifelong learning [5].

However, the study of Rotas & Cahapay [32] finds that the students have challenges in online collaborative learning in terms of communicating with their teams because of the unstable internet connectivity and insufficient learning resources. In support, this current situation in online collaborative learning worsens the existing inequalities and makes it more difficult to learn online. Despite efforts to make education more accessible to all, Filipino university students who pursue online education still face numerous challenges [33].

In the locality of New Bataan, Davao De Oro State College instructors utilize online collaborative learning activities as teaching strategies to facilitate online learning. The researchers observed that most students face problems in the online collaborative learning process, such as a lack of feedback from instructors and lack of feedback from peers. They have experienced slow internet connectivity to connect with their groupmates online and low or no or no participation of other group members. Meanwhile, the pandemic's mental, emotional, and social problems have a negative impact on students' learning processes [7].

The present condition of the social studies students in online collaborative learning merits an investigation to explore the general issues on the experiences and how the social studies students address the challenges of online collaborative learning. Collaborative learning has long been acknowledged for its benefits to the learners. It may assist learners, broaden understanding among students and educators, and create an environment conducive to cooperation in a positive atmosphere conducive to the development of learning communities. Collaborative learning that is well-implemented can improve knowledge development and increase learners' engagement and motivation in the learning process.

Furthermore, based on the general issues and problems presented, there is an urgency to conduct the study to know the online collaborative experiences of the social studies classroom through qualitative research, specifically a phenomenological approach. Although various research efforts have been made on online collaborative learning, few such studies have studied the online collaborative experiences of students in a social studies classroom in qualitative research during the new normal. In addition, the participants of this study are the social studies students in Davao De Oro State College New Bataan Branch. The in-depth interview and focus group discussion were used to collect participants' data. Hence, there is a lack of information on the experiences of the Social Studies students' in online collaborative learning. Thus, the researchers are prompted to pursue this study.

Meanwhile, this study anticipated generating findings on the lived experiences relative to the students' online collaborative experiences in a social studies classroom. Further, this study aims to generate results that may serve as a guide and reference for Higher Education Institutions and social studies instructors in planning and addressing the challenges of the students in online collaborative learning.

Furthermore, the findings of this study could become a basis for recognizing the importance of online collaborative experiences of students in a Social Studies classroomas a vital tool in developing students' virtual teamwork skills and boosting classroom engagement. In addition, the researcher's motivation to undertake this investigation is absent from research studies in the local area. The current paper will contribute to this area of interest by describing students' problems in online collaborative learning. This study will provide a potential contribution of a broader perspective of the state of global challenges of the students in online collaborative learning.

In addition, the findings of this study will rebound to the benefit of society, considering that social studies play an essential role in the social sciences, and online collaborative learning plays an essential role in the new normal. The greater demand for graduates with social studies backgrounds justifies the need for more effective, life-changing teaching approaches. Furthermore, the study result will be presented in the Davao De Oro State College New Bataan branch. This study will also help the Social Studies Instructors and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) provide a basis for developing and crafting extensive seminars and workshops for the instructors to be moreadept in making online collaborative learning and activities more meaningful to the students. As such, a distinct understanding of the students will be evident.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study utilized qualitative research, specifically a phenomenological approach. Qualitative research involves understanding a research question from a humanistic or idealistic perspective. This technique is used to understand better individuals' beliefs, experiences, attitudes, behavior, and interactions [28]. Qualitative research understands that human experiences are subject and involve various interpretations. This design was strongly suggested for analyzing complicated relationships and processes. Qualitative study is most effective in advancing our knowledge of perceptions, attitudes, and procedures [29].

Moreover, in this study, phenomenology was utilized in order to gain more in-depth insights into the nature or meaning of the online collaborative experiences of students in a social studies classroom to understand them and look for the meaning of their experiences. This study, phenomenology, was also suited as it disclosed the lived experiences of the social studies students' classroom in online collaborative learning. It unearthed

the struggles, challenges, and best and worst encounters related to the lived experiences of the social studies students' classroom in online collaborative learning.

Further, this study utilized purposive sampling. According to Palys [26], purposive sampling is an acceptable kind of sampling for special situations in which it uses a judgment of an expert in selecting cases, or it selects cases with a specific purpose in mind. This sampling method is commonly employed in qualitative research and relies on the researcher's judgment to make the best choice for the study's objectives.

The participants of this study were the seventeen (17) selected third-year students of Davao de Oro State College – New Bataan Branch, taking up Bachelor of Secondary Education Major in Social Studies. Ten (10) participants were selected for the individual in-depth interview, and another seven (7) participants were selected for focus group discussion. Moreover, they were the study participants because most of their enrolled subjects are their specialization at this year's level. Further, each of their specialized subjects requires the best activities that promote collaborative teamwork among the students. Moreover, this unraveled students' online collaborative experiences in a social studies classroom.

Garg [8] added that participants must have inclusion criteria to identify the study population as consistent, reliable, uniform, and objective. The participants of this study are the following: regular third-year BSED Social Studies students of Davao de Oro State College New Bataan have undergone specialization subjects and experienced challenges in online collaborative learning, while the irregular, shiftee, and transferee social studies are excluded in the study. A participant may withdraw consent at any time in writing, verbally, or fail to participate further. In addition, participants may withdraw as they wish they do not want to participate in the study.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Experiences of the Students Engaged in Online Collaborative Learning

From the Data collected on the experiences of the participants, six main themes have emerged. These themes helped to determine which core ideas to report. These themes are: 1) Communicating with groupmates became a challenge; 2) Online communication tools proved extremely useful; 3) Communicating in small groups or pairs is preferred; 4) Lack of gadgets and technology skills; health is affected; 5) Poor signal and

expensive internet fees; and 6) Everyone should be accountable for the time allotted.

Communicating with Groupmates Became a Challenge

Most study participants stated that communicating with groupmates had become a challenge. The participants expressed their difficulty in communicating with their groupmates because of the poor internet connectivity and lack of gadgets. Challenges in communication prevail in every communication process in online learning because of the distance, inadequate technical skills, difficulty using media, and poor internet connectivity. The effectiveness of online collaborative learning activities is measured by the level of interaction, how well it satisfies the students' needs, and how well it eliminates communication barriers between the students involved.

The result is aligned with the study of Robinson et al. [30], which asserted that online collaborative learning could be just as effective as face-to-face collaboration. Still, practical problems need to be taken into account. "Time, distance, technology, and internet connectivity insufficiencies" could make it difficult to do group work when they are not resolved. Students' encountered many challenges in online learning amid the pandemic, such as poor communication and unavailability of educational materials that may result from low participation of students in online lessons [2]; [11]; [21].

Online Communication Tools Proved Extremely Useful

The use of communication tools such as emails, online chats, videos, and discussion boards, have been useful for online collaborative learning activities. The use of communication tools can enhance the students' experience, positively affect students, and help them develop a positive view of ICT as a tool for learning and improving academic results. It is essential to incorporate communication tools to deliver instructional resources in an online learning environment in online collaborative learning activities. Khalil and Ebner [16] state that accessing and utilizing these tools is beneficial for developing higher-order thinking skills, learner-centered pedagogy, active and authentic learning, associative thinking, and facilitating online collaborative learning.

The result is congruent with the proposition of Zhu and Qi [35], which stated that teaching and learning had overgrown because of the internet. It is easy to learn through online platforms, which use computers, the

internet, technology, and platforms to create an online learning environment. Furthermore, creating and maintaining active and collaborative learning environments in the online learning domain depends on successfully integrating Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) to reduce the isolation felt by geographically diverse students. Activities from instructors let students take part in teaching activities using ICT tools that make use and interaction more accessible and work best. Students' learning depends on how the communication tools are implemented and how these tools are used within the pedagogical situation. [6]; [19]; [31].

Communicating in Small Groups or Pairs is Preferred

Another major theme in this study is that communicating in small groups or pairs is preferred. In successful online collaborative learning, the participants find it easy to communicate effectively in a small group or pairs. Gillies [10] reported that groups with 3-4 members worked best, while Christensen et al. [3] assumed that groups with five members performed better. Students can choose their group members, and the instructor can put them in a group.

The results parallel Listyani's [20] research, which states that even though online collaborative learning can be effective, it can also be challenging to integrate. First of all, everyone learns differently. Other students like working in groups, while others do not like it at all. Not everyone knows how to work well with others. Second, students who dislike working in groups will be less likely to participate because they lack confidence or have low self-esteem, making them feel like they are not as good as their peers. To maximize efficacy in online collaborative learning, instructors must implement the use of small group sizes (two to five students per group is recommended to achieve common goals. [18]; [34].

Lack of Gadget and Technology Skills; Health is Affected

Lack of gadgets and technology skills; health is affected one of the problems experienced by the students engaged in online collaborative learning. The participants expressed their problems in conducting online collaborative learning. Jessica [13] states that one of the most significant disadvantages of online learning is that it impacts students' physical health. The issue presented by this mode of education is that students must spend the entire semester or academic year engaged in front of a computer. Some students already have vision

difficulties experienced by online learning activities such as extensive e-reading and video streaming [4].

The result is in line with the study of Joubert and Synman [14], which stated that one problem of online learning that has affected many students worldwide is that most students lack devices to use during online courses. The problem of technical tool utilization in education must be reconsidered in light of two social classes: the "haves" and the "have-nots." In reality, not every student has a personal device for online learning, not due to a lack of desire but due to financial difficulties within their families [9].

Poor Signal and Expensive Internet Fess

Poor signal and expensive internet fees are one of the common challenges experienced by the students in dealing with online collaborative learning activities. The participants shared their challenges in their place's internet connectivity and the expensive internet fees they pay to participate in online collaborative learning activities. Students living in rural locations have comparable difficulties. Even if they have access to devices such as PCs, they can still not connect to the internet or online platform due to network difficulties. Rural areas typically have inadequate ICT-related infrastructures, such as electricity and telecommunications. To overcome this problem, many students are obliged to transfer to urban areas, where network connectivity is significantly better; this affects the expense of their education because they must pay rent [1].

The result is aligned with the proposition of Hameed et al. [12], which states that the problem with online learning templates is that the students cost too much to pay for access. Then there can be problems with the need for technical support and how things are set up. These technical problems can make it hard to connect to the internet. In turn, this will change how the virtual team works. Students' encountered many challenges in online learning amid the pandemic, such as poor internet connectivity and unavailability of educational materials that may result from low participation of students in online lessons [2]; [11]; [21].

Everyone Should be Accountable for the Time Allotted

In successful online collaborative learning activities, the group members should be accountable for the time allotted to accomplish the tasks. The participants expressed their experiences accomplishing the tasks in online collaborative learning activities. To ensure

effective participation and accountability from students in online collaboration, it is preferable to form small groups; most studies indicate that three to five students are the best size. Larger groups are more susceptible to "free riders" and necessitate a more active leader to organize and accomplish the tasks.

The result is congruent with the study of Malan and Van Dyk [22], which states that students do not always like working in groups because they have to deal with team members who are lazy or uncooperative and team members who miss deadlines. However, peer assessment can be used to establish individual accountability. Still, it does not always resolve the problems because some students hesitate to complete the peer score or do not like to rate their groupmates negatively. Positive interdependence and individual accountability are essential factors for group working processes [25]; [34].

IV. IMPLICATION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

Implications for Practice

Based on the findings presented, the following are the implication drawn.

Engaging in collaborative learning in the online environment is somewhat challenging for the students.

The implication of the students' experiences engaging in online collaborative learning is deemed beneficial to the government authorities in providing opportunities for online learning environments. First, communicating with groupmates became a challenge; the challenges in communication prevail in every communication process in online learning because of the distance, inadequate technical skills, difficulty using media, and poor internet connectivity. Students' encountered many challenges in online learning amid the pandemic, such as poor communication and unavailability of educational materials that may result from low participation of students in online lessons [2]; [11];[21]. It could be an advantage to the students to reflect on their responsibility as group members in findings ways to connect with the group. Further, they can also reflect on the importance of good communication in successfully achieving their tasks.

Also, online communication tools proved extremely useful; the use of communication tools such as emails, online chats, videos, and discussion boards, have been helpful for online collaborative learning activities. Khalil and Ebner [16] stated that accessing and utilizing communication tools is beneficial for developing higher-order thinking skills, learner-centered pedagogy, active and authentic learning, associative thinking, and facilitating online collaborative learning. This could also benefit the students in developing their technology skills and digital literacy. Thus, the students develop their technical skills, which are essential in today's knowledge society and appear to be important to peoples' life satisfaction and to build essential 21st-century skills.

Likewise, communicating in small groups or pairs is preferred; In successful online collaborative learning, the participants find it easy to communicate effectively in a small group or pairs. To maximize efficacy in online collaborative learning, instructors must implement the use of small group sizes (two to five students per group is recommended to achieve common goals [18]; [34]. Gillies [10] also reported that groups with 3-4 members worked best, while Christensen et al. [3] assumed that groups with five members performed better. This could also benefit the instructors to maximize efficacy in online collaborative learning by forming students in small group sizes. Thus, instructors can also reflect on the ideal group size to implement in engaging online collaborative learning to achieve common goals.

Additionally, lack of gadgets and technology skills; health is affected one of the problems experienced by the students engaged in online collaborative learning. Hameed et al. [12] stated that online learning has many problems. Joubert and Synman [14] stated that one problem of online learning that has affected many students is that most students lack devices to use during online courses. The problem of technical tool utilization in education must be reconsidered in light of two social classes: the "haves" and the "have-nots." In reality, not every student has a personal device for online learning, not due to a lack of desire but due to financial difficulties within their families [9]. The first problem is that they may not have the technology they need. Internet access, laptops, and desktop computers are just a few examples.

Further, Jessica [13] stated that one of the most significant disadvantages of online learning is that it impacts students' physical health. This could be significantly beneficial to the government authorities in providing additional assistance with learning resources such as technology to support students' online learning. Thus, this could be an advantage to the instructors in providing students with technical training before the

semester starts so that the students can acquire basic knowledge and skills in using technology.

Further, poor signal and expensive internet fees are one of the common challenges experienced by the students in dealing with online collaborative learning activities. Hameed et al. [12] state that the problem with online learning templates is that the students cost too much to pay for access. Then there can be problems with the need for technical support and how things are set up. These technical problems can make it hard to connect to the internet. In turn, this will change how the virtual team works. Students' encountered many challenges in online learning amid the pandemic, such as poor internet connectivity and unavailability of educational materials that may result from low participation of students in online lessons [2]; [11]; [21]. This could also benefit the government authorities to improve high internet connectivity to easy access for the students, especially in remote areas.

Also, everyone should be accountable for the time allotted. In successful online collaborative learning activities, the group members should be accountable for the time allotted to accomplish the tasks. However, peer assessment can be used to establish individual accountability. Still, it does not always resolve the problems because some students hesitate to complete the peer score or do not like to rate their groupmates negatively. Positive interdependence and individual accountability are essential factors for group working processes [25]; [34]. This could also benefit the instructors in developing students' accountability to take responsibility for their learning and actions. Thus, instructors play an important role in equipping students to be accountable in reflecting on their performance with the group in accomplishing the tasks.

Additionally, the implication of the result of the study is beneficial to the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)/ Social Studies Instructors. Formulating a learner's accountability system through a set of policies and practices will encourage instructors and administrators to innovate and design effective programs that will improve students' accountability in collaboration with their peers in an online learning environment. Also, to provide learners with technical skills training to capacitate learners' ability to use digital tools in an online learning environment. They may collaborate with telecommunication agencies via a memorandum of agreement to provide essential services and load assistance to students from far-flung areas who do not have access to internet connectivity by giving them load cards/sim cards with internet connectivity load. This will benefit the telecommunication agencies to expand their satellite services to their stakeholders in the field of education. Another, they may provide a basis for developing and crafting extensive seminars and workshops for the instructors to give online collaborative learning and activities more relevant to the students. In this way, this could help instructors use the best method and strategies in providing online collaborative learning and activities for the students. To promote and assist students in collaborating to develop knowledge, inventing and exploring innovative methods, and seeking conceptual knowledge essential to solving challenges to provide students with the appropriate support.

Thus, online collaborative group interactions facilitate students' active learning and sharing of knowledge and promote social interaction and a supportive online learning community. Online collaborative activities help train students for the 21st-century workplace, including sharing ideas, expressing opinions, and managing time.

Implications for Further Research

This study explored the students' lived experiences relative to online collaborative learning in a social studies classroom. Nevertheless, this qualitative exploration's result is focused only on the experiences of selected 3rd-year social studies students of Davao de Oro State College- New Bataan Branch.

In fact, this study provides contextual evidence on the various issues faced by the students engaged in collaborative learning in an online learning environment. With the results of this study, other researchers may further study the experiences of the students engaged in online collaborative learning.

Moreover, this qualitative study seeks to explore and understand students' lived experiences engaged in online collaborative learning. It has limitations on the scope of the participants in collecting the data. Future researchers could broaden its scope and should conduct a wide range of participants. Additionally, to get more extensive answers to the questions of this study, future researchers may conduct further research using a more extensive study with a more diverse sample of courses from different fields. They should cover a broader range of schools.

Thus, the results of this study may suggest that future researchers conduct a case study, quantitative, or

mixed-method to explore students' teamwork satisfaction, attitudes, and performance of students in online collaborative learning. From this, they could derive an essential framework for establishing effective and quality education in online collaborative learning.

Concluding Remarks

Online collaborative learning is highly relevant to primary and secondary school and higher education educational institutions. This strategy is frequently debated and applied, notably in the online learning environment, including social studies instruction. With online collaborative learning and the instructor's guidance, most students strongly agree with the application of learning methods that position students as social beings to develop peer relationships among students.

The researchers used in-depth interviews and focus group discussions to generate selected participants' experiences. The primary data source transcribes the participants' answers to the questions. During the interview, the researchers were challenged to convince the participants to share their experiences; they were very willing to do it.

Through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, it was found that students in a social studies classroom had several challenges and struggles with their experiences in online collaborative learning activities. Communicating with groupmates became a challenge as they took advantage of the group effect to free ride and spend minimal effort to help accomplish their tasks. Students also shared a lack of gadgets and technology skills, poor signal, and expensive internet fees.

Along with the conduct of this study, the researchers experienced how it feels to be a researcher. The researchers took all the necessary measures to make this research successful. It is demanding because it requires time, patience, and perseverance to gather quality and relevant data that will support the study.

Furthermore, for collaborative learning to be effective in the online learning environment, educators must also incorporate a planned approach to achieve successful online collaborative learning for the students. Considerations concerning group size, group formation, and group management play a vital factor in the success of group work. There may always be students within the group who take advantage of the group effect and expend minimal effort to help accomplish the group tasks and earn the same grade as their group members. In this study, it appears that the majority of the group members exerted efforts and cooperated in their group tasks, got the necessary knowledge, and contributed to solving the problem in accomplishing the tasks.

To conclude, online collaborative learning is a practical learning approach that allows students to exchange ideas, evaluate other students' inputs, and become part of the knowledge creation process. Within the online learning environment, collaborative learning can be equally effective if the educator closely monitors time and connectivity challenges. However, most students indicated that they prefer to work independently rather than in a group in online collaborative learning.

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