

A Retrospective Study on Students' Lived Experiences in Virtual Qualitative Research

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Abstract

This retrospective qualitative study explores the lived experiences of senior high school students who engaged in Virtual Qualitative Research during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using a narrative design guided by Salmons' (2016) Qualitative e-Research Framework and Braun and Clarke's (2012) thematic analysis, the study involved 44 purposively selected Grade 11 students from the Technical-Vocational-Livelihood (TVL) strand of a public school in the Philippines. Data were gathered through online interviews, written narratives, and chat-based responses addressing the question, "How do you find learning Qualitative Research virtually?"

Three overarching themes emerged: (1) difficulty in learning and adjusting to research in an online environment, (2) struggles with maintaining focus, motivation, and time management, and (3) the development of interest, independence, and self-directed learning. Students initially faced technological barriers and distractions but gradually adapted by cultivating discipline, resilience, and autonomy.

Ethical considerations included informed consent, parental approval, confidentiality, and reflexive awareness of the teacher-researcher's dual role. The study concludes that while virtual research instruction posed multiple challenges, it also nurtured adaptability and self-reliance among learners. Retrospectively, these experiences highlight the transformative potential of crisis-driven education when supported by empathy, flexibility, and reflective teaching practices.

Keywords: Retrospective Study, Lived Experiences, Virtual Learning, Qualitative Research, COVID-19 Pandemic

Introduction -

Looking back on the sudden transition to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, education systems around the world—particularly in the Philippines—were compelled to adopt alternative modes of instruction. The Department of Education (DepEd) implemented flexible learning modalities, including online and modular approaches, to continue academic engagement despite lockdowns and health restrictions (Javier, 2021).

This study revisits and reflects on how senior high school students experienced virtual learning in the subject of Qualitative Research—a discipline that typically depends on interpersonal interaction, mentorship, and experiential learning. While previous research has addressed the general challenges of online education (Bailey & Lee, 2020; Gillett-Swan, 2017), few have explored how students internalized and adapted to research learning in purely digital contexts. It also seeks to capture not only students' challenges but also their evolving perceptions, coping strategies, and personal growth. It underscores how the experience of learning research virtually shaped their understanding of inquiry, self-reliance, and the value of education in times of crisis.

The study aims to describe, through reflective retrospection, the lived experiences of Grade 11 students in the Technical-Vocational-Livelihood (TVL) strand as they engaged in Virtual Qualitative Research during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings are expected to inform educators and policy-makers about the realities of teaching and learning research in virtual environments and to identify lessons that can improve future blended or flexible modalities.

Review of Related Literature

Online learning environments redefine how students construct knowledge, interact, and develop autonomy. Bolliger and Martin (2018) emphasized that virtual engagement and a sense of belonging enhance online learning satisfaction, while Yu (2021) found that gender and personality factors influence persistence and outcomes.

In the Philippine context, Alvarez (2020) and Famularsih (2020) observed that connectivity issues, lack of devices, and limited digital literacy often hinder effective online participation. However, few studies focus on research-based subjects, which require critical analysis, collaboration, and ethics in data handling. By reflecting on the experiences of TVL students, this study addresses a gap in understanding how learners in resource-constrained contexts adapt to complex academic tasks, such as conducting qualitative research virtually.

Methodology

Design and Framework

This study employed a narrative qualitative design within the lens of Salmons' (2016) Qualitative e-Research Framework, allowing retrospective reflection on online research experiences. Braun and Clarke's (2012) six-phase thematic analysis guided the interpretation of recurring and emerging themes.

Participants

The participants were 44 Grade 11 TVL students from a public high school in the Philippines. They were selected through purposive sampling, based on willingness, consent, and stable internet connectivity. Although 162 students were enrolled in the subject, only those who could actively participate were included.

Data Collection and Instruments

Data were gathered through a single open-ended prompt: “How do you find learning Qualitative Research virtually?” Responses were collected through online interviews, written narratives, or chat submissions, depending on accessibility. Data collection spanned two weeks.

Ethical Procedures

Ethical compliance was ensured through informed consent and parental approval. Participants were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation. Given the researcher’s dual role as teacher, reflexive journaling and bracketing techniques were used to avoid coercion and maintain objectivity.

Data Analysis

Responses were transcribed, coded, and clustered into themes using inductive thematic analysis. Credibility was enhanced through member checking and peer validation. Rich descriptions of the setting established transferability, while dependability and confirmability were achieved through audit trails and reflective notes.

Phase	Process / Step	Data Extracts (Examples)	Initial Codes	Subthemes	Final Themes
1.Familiarization with Data	Reading and re-reading responses to gain an overall sense of meaning.	“It’s hard because the internet is weak.” / “I can’t focus because of noise at home.” / “I learned to manage my time better.”	Connectivity issues Distractions Time management – Self-learning	—	—

Phase	Process / Step	Data Extracts (Examples)	Initial Codes	Subthemes	Final Themes
2. Generating Initial Codes	Systematically coding relevant features across the dataset.	“Studying online is confusing.” / “Sometimes I can’t submit because of poor signal.” / “I’ve learned to be more independent.”	– Difficulty understanding lessons – Poor internet connection – Stress and confusion – Independence developed	– Cognitive difficulty – Technological barriers – Self-directed learning	—
3. Searching for Themes	Collating codes into potential themes based on similarity and conceptual relation.	Various codes clustered into broader meaning units.	– Cognitive difficulty – Emotional stress – Poor signal – Family distractions – Independence – Motivation	– Barriers to learning – Emotional and mental adjustment – Growth and adaptation	(A) Difficulty in Learning and Adjusting (B) Struggles with Focus and Motivation (C) Emergence of Independence and Self-Learning
4. Reviewing Themes	Refining and merging overlapping categories; checking coherence between data and thematic map.	Data were revisited to ensure each theme accurately represented participants’ meanings.	– “Difficult” and “Challenging” merged under <i>Learning Difficulty</i> – “Stress” and “Motivation” merged under <i>Focus Struggles</i>	– Cognitive-technical barriers – Psychosocial adjustment – Adaptive learning	Same 3 core themes retained (A–C)
5. Defining and Naming Themes	Identifying the essence of each theme and writing clear definitions.	Representative statements used for naming themes.	– Theme A: Difficulty learning and adjusting – Theme B: Struggles with focus and motivation – Theme C: Growth through independence	—	—

Phase	Process Step /	Data Extracts (Examples)	Initial Codes	Subthemes	Final Themes
6. Producing the Report	Integrating themes into coherent narrative supported by quotes.	<p>"I can't focus properly since there are many distractions." (B8)</p> <p>"Online learning helped me manage my time and be independent." (G11)</p> <p>"It was hard at first, but I learned to challenge myself." (G12)</p>	—	—	—

Results and Discussion

Three major retrospective themes emerged from students' narratives: Difficulty in Learning and Adjusting to Virtual Research; Struggles with Focus, Motivation, and Time Management; and Emergence of Interest, Independence, and Self-Directed Learning.

1. Difficulty in Learning and Adjusting to Virtual Research

Most students retrospectively recalled significant challenges in understanding research concepts online due to unstable connectivity, environmental distractions, and limited direct feedback. *"It's hard to learn research online because the internet connection and distractions make it difficult to focus."* (G8). This difficulty mirrors findings by Bailey and Lee (2020), emphasizing that sudden technological transitions without adequate preparation impact comprehension and motivation.

2. Struggles with Focus, Motivation, and Time Management

Students reflected that the absence of classroom structure required greater self-discipline. Managing time between household chores and academic tasks tested their perseverance. *"At first everything felt challenging. I had to learn to discipline myself and balance home and school responsibilities."* (G12). This echoes Lyall and McNamara (2000), who noted that online learners bear greater responsibility for pacing and engagement, demanding intrinsic motivation and adaptability.

3. Development of Interest, Independence, and Self-Directed Learning

Despite the struggles, many students retrospectively valued the experience for fostering independence and problem-solving skills. *“Online learning taught me to be more independent and manage my time better.” (G11).* This transformation reflects the principles of constructivism, where learning emerges through self-directed exploration (Sun et al., 2008). Retrospectively, students viewed the experience as a turning point that reshaped their learning habits and perseverance.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity was central to the study’s design and implementation. Students were treated as co-learners rather than subjects. Voluntary participation, informed consent, and data protection were strictly observed. The researcher maintained reflexive awareness of power dynamics inherent in being both teacher and researcher. This retrospection reinforced the importance of empathy, neutrality, and respect for student voice in educational inquiry.

Limitations and Future Directions

Reflecting on the study’s limitations, several constraints became evident: the participant pool was limited to one school, restricting broader generalization; connectivity barriers excluded some voices; and the researcher’s dual role may have unintentionally shaped participant responses. Future researchers may explore comparative analyses across learning strands, integrate teacher and parent perspectives, or examine the long-term effects of virtual learning on research competence and academic confidence.

Personal Reflexivity

Looking back, this study became both a pedagogical and personal journey. As a teacher-researcher, I witnessed how crisis-driven education redefined resilience, empathy, and adaptability. I realized that learning is not confined by modality—it thrives when students are supported, trusted, and guided with compassion. Retrospectively, this experience deepened my understanding of the learner’s perspective: their frustrations, their perseverance, and their silent victories. It challenged me to embrace more flexible, student-centered, and context-sensitive approaches in future research instruction.

Conclusion

The study revealed that students’ experiences in virtual qualitative research were marked by struggle, adaptation, and growth. The initial challenges of technology, focus, and motivation gradually gave way to self-directed learning and independence. Students learned not only the methods of research but also the discipline of persistence amid uncertainty. The findings affirm that virtual learning, when coupled with supportive teaching and reflective practice, can foster deeper resilience and autonomy among learners. For educators, this retrospection serves as a reminder that teaching qualitative research online requires not just digital tools, but human connection, flexibility, and compassion.

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