

Challenges in Blended Learning: A Narrative from Working Students

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Abstract:- Working while studying is a common experience for many college students worldwide. Despite the threat of the pandemic and the challenges in the blended learning modalities, working students continue to juggle their work and academic obligations. Numerous studies have been conducted that explored the experiences of working students, but these were conducted in the pre-pandemic setting and they do not tackle the relevant experiences of working students in the new normal, specifically the challenges they face in blended learning. To explore the experiences of working students and their challenges in blended learning, the researchers utilized a transcendental phenomenological research design and interviewed three working students from the Bachelor in Secondary Education (BSED) – Social Studies program of Leyte Normal University who were selected after a demographic survey. The study revealed that their primary reason to work was because of financial necessity. They also gained relevant skills while working. However, they considered their work as a hindrance to their personal responsibilities and expressed concerns over their health and well-being. The participants also stated that blended learning is both beneficial and challenging. The challenges they faced in blended learning are (1) conflict in schedule, (2) heavy academic workload, (3) non-attendance in synchronous classes and (4) the lack of technological resources. To address these challenges, they utilized various coping mechanisms such as resorting to support systems, approaching their teachers, and development of time management skills.

Keywords:- Challenges, blended learning, narratives, working students.

I. INTRODUCTION

Higher education falls short of its aim to create social mobility when individuals who are academically qualified lack the financial means to study and excel in college, leading to an exacerbation of socioeconomic inequalities (Odele&Perna, 2020). To financially sustain their education, students in college primarily rely on scholarship grants, family support and school loans while some start saving for college, years ahead of time to handle the numerous costs of finishing their degree (Fontinelle, 2021).

While there are other means to financially support oneself in college, there are students who seek viable employment while studying. Working students seek work opportunities to earn a living in the areas of restaurant services, retail jobs, on-campus student jobs, private tutoring

programs and volunteer work (Byrne, 2016). This is a recurring experience of many college students across the globe. Data from Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce reveal that for the past 25 years, over 70% of students have been devoting time away from their education to earn a living, allocating 15 to 35 hours per week for work. In the Philippines, available data from the Commission on Higher Education show that 8% of the total college students in the country work while studying.

The reasons to work may vary from one student to another but the common driver is for students to be financially independent and meet the expenses of their daily lives (Chantrea, 2017). Watts and Pickering (2000), as cited in the study of Antipolo (2021), also stress that the vast number of students juggle work and their education mainly because it is a source for financial resources that enables them to meet their academic and study obligations.

There are advantages from the experiences working students have which is a result of their dual role as a student and as a worker (Kwadzo, 2014). Significantly, it enables them to grow as a person and develop transferable skills like communication, teamwork and time management which are crucial when joining the workforce (Jewell, 2014). William (2014) further establishes that it empowers students to be versatile in their day-to-day dealings by adjusting schedules and activities and eases the students' shift from their undergraduate lives to post-graduate employment.

As opposed to these benefits, working students also experience challenges and difficulties. In the study of Kwadzo (2014), he reveals that working students experience physical and mental stress which led to exhaustion, sleep deprivation, conflicting roles, homesickness, and dissatisfaction. Overwhelming academic tasks and workload causes stress to students which makes it difficult for them to continue studying and working simultaneously (Irfan & Azmi, 2014). Furthermore, employment limits the time students have for academic work which may result in less academic success. Employment also affects the attitude and dedication of a student toward their studies. It has also been found to have an impact on attendance, with about 25% of students citing it as their primary excuse for missing classes (Zhang & Yang, 2020).

On March of 2020, countries declared national health emergencies because of the coronavirus disease (COVID) 2019 pandemic. Not only did it affect the socioeconomic and psychological facets of society, but also the sector of education to a large extent. The epidemic that started in 2019 forced the closure of schools which prompted all education

institutions to switch to remote learning resulting in the changes of the conventional way of teaching (Rotas, 2020). As a response to this, colleges and universities proceeded in implementing intervention procedures known as emergency remote education which includes the blended learning modalities to continue the delivery of learning (Hodges et al., 2020). Blended learning modalities is a method of teaching that combines synchronous and asynchronous learning (Chaeruman et al, 2018).

Major challenges arose in the blended learning setup such as difficulties in self-studying, the lack of technological devices, poor internet connectivity, sleep deprivation and poor time management to perform academic tasks (Lapitan, 2021). A study of Giray et al. (2022) reveals that despite the fact that many Filipino college students consider online education to be beneficial during the pandemic because it offers various amenities and eradicates the need to travel to school, a sizable number of students hold the opposite opinion by acknowledging that they experience challenges in the transitioning to the new learning setups due to issues with technology and internet access, mental health, expenses and time management. Despite the new mode of learning to be convenient and flexible because it fosters a balance between their work and studies, the sudden shift from blended learning caused by the pandemic has also revealed economic and educational disparities, prompting some students to keep on working while completing their undergraduate degree since they depend greatly on the money they earn to continuously fund their education (Ebardo& Wibowo, 2021).

These challenges can be addressed by employing mechanisms to alleviate the working student's situations. To balance their work obligations and academic duties, implementing a proper schedule would be of great assistance (Awi et al, 2021). Having a variety of support systems is essential in maintaining the motivation of a working student. Working students also found instant feedback from their teachers to monitor their school progress helpful (Ebardo& Wibowo, 2021).

Existing literature relevant to the topic at hand mostly focus on the experiences of working students during the pre-pandemic setting (Irfam& Azmi, 2014; Jewell, 2014; Kwadzo; 2014; Chantrea, 2017) and these studies do not tackle the experiences of working students in the new normal, specifically their challenges in blended learning. Additionally, there is a need to conduct this study because it is evident among some Bachelor in Secondary Education (BSED) –Social Studies students at Leyte Normal University to work despite the threats of the pandemic and the challenges in blended learning. With this, the researchers would be able to contribute new knowledge that could assist parents, teachers, and school administrators to further understand the experiences of working students in the time of the pandemic. This study aimed to narrate and describe the firsthand experiences of working students and their challenges in blended learning.

II. METHODOLOGY

The researchers employed a qualitative research design. This design is appropriate for the study because it allowed the researchers to explore the unquantifiable meanings and perspectives of Social Studies working students in blended learning and provided an in-depth and detailed description of their experiences. Furthermore, it investigated the significance and meanings of such human experiences toward increased awareness of the phenomenon (Taylor & Francis, 2013). Specifically, a phenomenological research design was employed to collect and describe the conscious and firsthand experiences of the student-participants. Creswell (2013) states that a phenomenological research design gives emphasis to the lived experiences of a specific sector and their shared attributes.

Among the State Universities and Colleges (SUC) in Tacloban City, the study was conducted at Leyte Normal University for it is the most convenient and most accessible for the researchers to gather data considering the limited social interaction brought by the pandemic and it is the only university in the city which offers Social Studies specialization aside from Leyte Colleges. A demographic survey was conducted among Social Studies majors from the university. The participants were selected based on the following criteria:

- working students during the pandemic and;
- have experience with the blended learning modalities.

In gathering the data needed for this study, a semi-structured interview was utilized in this qualitative study which allowed the researchers to ask pre-made and unplanned questions that will give the participants the opportunity to address and discuss unclarified issues and concerns. The research instrument was validated through a pilot testing on three subjects who fell under the same criteria but are from a different university.

For the actual data gathering procedure, a demographic survey was conducted to identify the research participants who qualified under the set criteria. After identifying the subjects of the study, a letter of consent was given to signify their full participation and willingness in the study. When the letter was already signed, the identified participants were asked on their most convenient time and place where they were comfortable and available for the conduct of the interview. The study conducted face-to-face and onsite interviews to gather data that will describe the real-world experiences of the student participants. During the actual interview process, the researchers read the informed consent agreement form to the participant to assure that the data gathered is treated with confidentiality. A tape recorder was used, and the recorded audio was transcribed. At the same time, the researchers observed and wrote down the participant's behavior and gestures while answering the interview questions.

After the semi-structured and face-to-face interview, the outcomes of the study were processed by using thematic content analysis. This method of data analysis classifies data according to themes, concepts, or similar features by extracting the essential and significant meanings from the large amount of data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2006 as cited by Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Experiences of a Working Student during the Pandemic

The experiences of a working student during the pandemic are influenced by financial motivation and benefits to pursue employment despite being a student. With that, they experience hindrances in achieving their academic responsibilities because of the nature of their work.

a) Financial Motivation to Work

From the gathered data, the participants' primary reason are to sustain their financial needs in attending the blended learning modalities, these include cellular mobile data and technological devices used in blended learning. In addition, some participants being working students help them support their families' financial needs. This coincides with the studies of Duncan (2018) and Nucum (2018), establishing that students are primarily driven by their financial standing because it is a means for them to achieve financial freedom and to suffice their financial resources so that their immediate and fundamental needs would be sustained.

P1: "So for me it is a financial factor because when the pandemic started, my father had.. had no job so that's why I have come up, to go back at work at Jollibee... I cover my own expenses."

P2: "Ha akon... financial reason, diri gad ha about family. Baga't to support myself la for studies, para maging, para diri akmaging dependent ha akon parent para it iranakitankuan income para la liwatambaga't expenses nala ha balay."

P3: "So the very reason why I decided to work because of financial aspect of my family. Dati kasi, since nag start an pandemic, as in talagawarayat alaga an akonkuyanaapektuhan an iya work tas an akonmgabugtowardaynasuporta so I decided ngaakolabinahan pan-load taposkada week may klase so I decided talagana mag work para nagihapmakabulig ha usa ko nabugto kay college student, usanga nursing ha VSU taposwaraygihapnasuporta ha iyapagpa-load so agihinnga work, diri ko la nasusupportahnitonakonsarili, nakakabuliggihapako ha akonbugto as well ha akon family. Amo an akon very reason para makabulig ha akon family ngan ha akon self."

b) Work as a Hindrance

The participants narrate that their work becomes a hindrance to their personal responsibilities and well-being. From the gathered data collected, the participants of the study experience hectic work schedules that results in exhaustion that limits their concentration in work and in their academic responsibilities. Additionally, they raised concerns over their health, citing that working during a global pandemic raises health concerns for their personal health as well as their families.

P1: "Agi hit... agi hit kakapoy hit trabahodanay..danayna straight akohin from opening to closing that's why I don't have time to kuanna.. To work with my modules. That's why nakaka-submit akohinakon modules 3 weeks after the due."

P2: "Ano, it kapoy like ten-- eight to ten hours naako, tasdanayna-extend man akohito, danayna twelve hours naakodidto. Pag-uli ko baga'tmakapoynatalaga, mapirawna so dire naknakakaghimu"

P3: " Maydahadtousana subject talangakulangtalagahinpagtutdo so na stress ako. So waray ko itotrabaho-a. So, natima ko ada hiya, kanan first sem. pa hiya. Natima ko la hiya yana la nga May. Bagat di ko kasi kaya. Bagatnagkamayda depression talagahadto, nag titino-ok la akobagatnawaratalagaakonganbagandiri ko gusto umeskwelaadtona January na month. Bagatnakawarayananaba"

In terms of health and well-being, A student's physical and mental health can eventually be negatively impacted by pursuing one's full-time education and undertaking a part-time employment, which can have an adverse influence on academic achievement (Darolia et al., 2014). Being a student and working at the same time has the drawback of leaving little time for sleeping and keeping healthy eating routine which is one of the primary concerns of working students. (Gorgulho et al., 2012).

c) Benefits of a Working Student

The participants cite benefits of being a working student in accordance with their experiences. The gathered data shows that being a working student improves their communication skills because of the interactive nature of their work, improves their time management in setting their priorities in both their academic responsibilities and work, and enhances their interpersonal skills where they learned to be respectful, helpful, and understanding towards others. Working while studying developed the necessary transferable skills for future employment (Jewell, 2014; Zhang & Yang, 2020)

P1: "having a good communication from the customer itself and having a..a what we call that uhm managing from.. From the work which is happening from one station to another station"

P2: "Uhmoo, kay diba ahh ma- - awdunon kasi ako so didto, baga'na, pag-adtonaakonaanoakonamagyan, maging confident bisan dire amo"

P3: "Oo. Kay datitalagahankuanhan first year, an may klase pa, diritalagaakonayakan as in awdonotalagaako. Diribaakonakigyakan bis kankanay. Pero aginagtrabahoakobagatnadug-ngan an akon confidence makipag communicate. Open ba mag kamay-ada bond ha ibanatawo"

Most of the participants found working while studying beneficial in terms of developing their good communication towards their interlocutor as part of their role in entertaining and accommodating customer's queries. While two participants stated that being a working student helped them overcome being a timid person. It also strengthens their confidence in socializing with different people around them.

B. Working Students' Perspective on Blended Learning

Participants also share their perspectives of working students in blended learning. According to them, blended learning can be beneficial and challenging.

a) Positive Perspective

The participants see blended learning as an opportunity to seek employment and earn money because of distant learning and the non-fixed time schedule for synchronous classes. Since the blended learning setup allows students to choose their own pace of learning, working students found blended learning helpful in seeking jobs and gaining financial independence (Tupas et al., 2020; Nucum, 2018).

P1: "Helpful especially as a working student we earn money not just like han face-to-face setup"

P2: "Oo, kay kuannakakag-work ka, na earn ka while nagstudytapos basta mag—time management la or self-discipline"

P3: "Nakakabulig hiya gad hit kuan financially"

b) Negative Perspective

The participants narrated that blended learning leads to poor academic performance due to lack of concentration on work and school, a lack of time to complete academic requirements, and an inability to comprehend the lessons as a result of having divided attention between work and school. Employment reduces the time available for academic activities, leading to poor academic performance (Guo, 2017). Because of this, working students must devote a significant amount of time to both their work and studies, which is a challenging task (Azmi et al., 2014).

P1: "Having my time is divided for work while studying and then from doing the modules and attending online classes makuriigkuan..makuriig merge—aw ig divide it imo time"

P2: "So nakukuanako hit danaywaray ko ba concentration kunada 'ko hit skwelahan or danay ha work."

P3: "Parteliwathiningapag-eskwela, bagat nag-iba an akon experiences. Bagatnapapabayaannonaba an iba like damona an akonnapapabayaannamga activities like damotalaga an akon late tapos backlogs as in ansyahantalagadamo an akon backlogs"

IV. CHALLENGES IN BLENDED LEARNING

Working students experience challenges in blended learning which are conflict in schedules, heavy academic workload, missed synchronous classes, and lack of technological resources.

A. Conflict of Schedules

The participants have conflicts of schedules in the blended learning modality. Participants mentioned that it is the major challenge for them to be responsive in both work and academic aspects. Students' nature of work demands them to be always physically present which leads to non-attendance in synchronous classes.

P1: "During pandemic, it is a challenging for me specially we have an onlineclasses and I have a work."

P2: "Uhm in terms of problem I encounter, hectic schedule ba in school and in work. It is challenging uhm challenging to balance ba within... ahh between my work and my studies."

P3: "Makuri hiya. Damotnapalitba, di talagaaknakagfocussugadkadaorastapos habang may napalit bisan gusto mag-recite, gusto ko mamati, dirinakapamatihintuhaytapos everyday iton hiya labinakun may klase."

B. Heavy Academic Workload

The participants cite their heavy academic workloads due to limited time to work on the academic tasks. Participants mentioned that they have more time in the workplace that resulted in their academic task to be less prioritized the high demand for the students to be at work leaves them with heavy academic workload because of the divided time between their employment obligations and school. Studies show that it is a challenge for working students in finding a balance between their work and studies (Nucum, 2018; Azmi et al, 2014).

P1: "Pagpasa hit modules, pag-attend hit classes then how— anopa.. then pag-attend hit classes then pag submit hit immga modules on time diri overdue"

P2: "Uhm maydaba times nga you will go on a day nawaraykatu-katurug kay kailangan mag trabaho and then you need to prepare for classes like you need to study."

P3: “Oo, mayayakan ko yanana gin prioritize ko natalagaitonakon work. Damo na an akonnapapabayaannamga activities like damotalaga an akon late tapos backlogs as in ansyahantalagadamo an akon backlogs.”

C. Missed Synchronous Classes

Participants also miss their synchronous classes in the blended learning. The participants pointed out that due to the high demand of attention required in their workplace, they are most likely to miss synchronous classes caused by simultaneous demand of their presence in their workplace. This is supported by the study of Zhang and Yang (2020), indicating that their work hinders them from attending classes.

P1: “Diriaknaattend hit online class due to my work taposdibamaydakitamga professor ngatigdahanataghin link then dire aknasabotmagkakklasengay-an that’s why I can’t attend the online classes.”

P2: “Asyaito schedule. Nakaka-absent akodahayako ha school.”

P3: “Amo naadto like yanadibasugadnagklaklase, sugadadoakotrabahotapositionatime maydaklase. As in, sugad may recitation talagatasdiriakonatutuhaypamati. Diriaiko nakakafocus.”

D. Lack of Technological Resources

The participants share that they lack technological resources for the blended learning modalities. From the data collected, having no gadgets for this learning setup is one of the determinants that makes blended learning challenging. The study of Aldosemani et al. (2018) revealed that factors such as lack of computers, poor internet connectivity and access, and unstable LMSs creates barriers in blended learning in the Philippines.

P1: “I don’t have any resources especially when the pandemic started. Narubanak cellphone then kinurianakhadtona part asya I have decided to work para magka-mayda resources.”

P2: “Cellphone la takmayda so dire gihapakonakakag-ayosbapaghimohan module kay makuri man cellphone, cellphone la.”

P3: “Umm kuan I have only cellphone. Pero ha laptop namimiling pa talagaako para makapag- edit danay”

V. COPING MECHANISM

The participants describe the coping mechanisms they use to overcome the challenges they experience which are developing time management skills, approaching teachers, and support systems. Coping strategies play a significant role in helping working students tackle every obstacle and solve every challenge that comes with being a working student.

A. Developing Time Management

The participants describe how they deal with the challenge of balancing work and study by developing time management skills and creating a checklist to monitor academic tasks. According to Rotas and Cahapay (2020), students must master time management skills, finish learning tasks ahead of time, and extend the time allotted for learning tasks to complete lesson activities.

P1: “I create a kuan, ‘to do list.’ Kunbagahiningaorasdapataydon ko it usangakuan... usanga module tashinengaoras mag himotakusangakuan... usanga assignments then tasinengaoras mag eexamako. Amo tak gin bubuhat para in order for me ngatapos ko it akonmga remaining task nga nag overdue na.”

P2: “Oo, kuan la time management. Taposnaghimo man akohin checklist nga para manonitor an akonmga modules tas an ira deadline.”

One of the participants, however, claimed that they lacked the time management skills to handle the difficulty of balancing work and study. The participant manages according to the amount of energy available to complete the academic work, producing numerous backlogs of work that need to be finished.

P3: “Siguroyana, about ha management bagatkuan la, balyo-balyobakunmaydagana nala akoamo nala itonakonpagtrabaho kay dibakapoyako hit work. Urogtalagawarayako. So sugadnanakapahuwaynaako tuhaypagkaagaamo nala itonakonpagtrabaho hit akon activities bagatwaraynaako time management na kay kadaadlaw man akona work kun may ada nala gana.”

B. Approaching Teachers

The participants approach teachers to manage the bulk of the demanding academic workload. Working students have trouble in submitting their academic outputs on time. They cope by approaching teachers, explaining their circumstances, and requesting deadline extensions. Approaching teachers enables students to handle their class activities, crediting to a successful online or telephone assistance system as part of institutions' e-learning initiatives which gives students a platform for teacher discussion about subject-related concerns (Rotas and Cahapay, 2020).

P1: “Uhm, I ask kuan.. I ask my professor if I could pass or I can retake the exam especially ginyayakan ko ha ira it akon circumstances ngainaaagian.”

P2: “Kuan, ginmemessageko’tmga instructor nasugadhini, mag-extend hin deadline bisan la tutob la buwas.”

P3: “Oo, kunpagdanayliwatnagmemessage la akopag update sugadna late ako nag co- comment la ako ha classroom na late ako. Nag iisstate la akohitonakon reason.”

C. Support Systems

The participants resort to support systems such as financial aid, support from family and academic kiosks or learning hubs to mitigate the burden and address the challenges and educational needs. This is further reinforced by a study of Matswetu et al. (2020), which found that students who lack access to the internet look for alternatives to fulfill their obligations. Additionally, students might handle distance learning by borrowing instructional materials. Because academic duties necessitate laptops or computers, getting help from family members and other relatives who can provide instant assistance is a typical coping method (Osafo, 2017).

P1: "Luckily for me nana-apilakohan TES then nakapalitakohin laptop and cellphone."

P2: "Ha akpatod la pero mostly nagamit hiya so nagcocomputer nala ako, pero like naka-plan nakun anu takhihimuon para pagkadto ko comshop, maghihimoakdayon...Ngan ha cp man mostly aknaghihimohin module sugad hit pag encode, paghimo ppt, pagvideo, patipag edit, tanan as in."

P3: "Tapos ha Wi-Fi liwat, free Wi-Fi gihapitonakongintratrabahoan, nakakconnectako. Mayda man kami academic kiosk kanan LNU ngadi. Navisitakodidapag pa-print nganpaghuramhin laptop pag-edit, pagconvert ha mga word file ha PDF."

VI. CONCLUSION

As students across the globe continue to brave the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is essential to understand the experiences of working students and the challenges they face with blended learning. Through the narratives of working students from the BSED-Social Studies program of Leyte Normal University, this study has established that working students primarily work to financially support their families and their needs for the blended learning modalities. Through their work, they developed essential skills. However, they considered their work as a hindrance to their personal responsibilities, and they were concerned with their personal health and the health of their families especially in the time of the pandemic. The participants view blended learning as both beneficial and challenging. It is beneficial because it gives them the opportunity to earn a living. On the other hand, they view blended learning as challenging because their attention is divided between work and studies. The challenges encountered by working students with blended learning are the conflict in schedules, the heavy academic workload, non-attendance in synchronous classes and the lack of technological resources. The participants also employ mechanisms to cope with the challenges in blended learning such as developing their time management skills and utilizing a checklist. They also approach their teachers and request for extension in deadlines and avail services from education support systems such as scholarship grants and the university's academic kiosk or learning hub.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results and findings of this study, the following recommendations are drawn:

- Working students should instill self-discipline and develop effective time management skills to balance their work duties and academic obligations. They may utilize the checklisting technique to monitor their activities and avail services from academic support-systems to assist them in dealing with the challenges of blended learning.
- Parents should be understanding towards their children's present situation, juggling both their academic responsibilities and their job. They must support them in pursuing their undergraduate degree by providing them with their basic needs and by guiding them in their endeavors.
- Teachers should understand the real-life situation and experiences of working students, especially the challenges they face with blended learning. Teachers must employ the appropriate measures such as reinforcement activities or make-up classes that enable working students to catch up with their lessons.
- School administrators should establish and implement school-based programs such as on-campus work opportunities and academic support systems that would financially support working students, develop essential skills and knowledge for future employment and assist them in the challenges they experience with blended learning.
- Future Researchers should utilize other methods, variables, and a wider sample size to broaden the existing knowledge on the topic at hand to better understand the experiences of working students.

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