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Opportunities and challenges of working students in blended learning

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Article Info

Abstract

This study aims to understand the working students' whole experience from an entirely new learning perspective. To examine and capture their lived experiences, this qualitative study used a descriptive phenomenological design. Snowball sampling was used to collect data from 10 working students. Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis was used to evaluate the data, resulting in five themes: (1) Skill development, (2) Factors influencing students to work, (3) Benefits of blended learning approach, (4) Challenges and struggles, and (5) Personal growth. Results showed that a blended learning approach presents opportunities and challenges to working students' lives. Hence, this study has shed light on this dynamic and frequently overlooked set of learners' experiences. This study suggests conducting additional research comparing the experiences of working college students who participate in blended learning to those of students who attend regular classroom settings. Institutions should widen their scope in educational approach, ensuring that students receive the support they need to succeed in their academic journey.

1. Introduction

College Working Students are students enrolled in college but working full-time or part-time. Because of this, they need more time to devote to their studies, which can negatively affect their academic performance. The Blended Learning approach refers to integrating both online and in-person learning methods. In a conventional educational setting, all instruction is typically conducted through face-to-face interactions, including lectures, discussions, laboratory sessions, and other educational activities. Conversely, online learning predominantly delivers course content digitally, with minimal in-person engagement (Garment, 2022) [14].

Working and studying is difficult, especially for full-time students who work more hours per week while adjusting to new learning modalities in our educational system. Nowadays, studying while working has grown popular. According to the most recent CHED Philippines data, more than 216,000 students are balancing study and job. Approximately 8% of all college students in the nation are working. Today's working students are primarily employed in sales, Business Process Outsourcing, and the food service industry. Working may be a necessity or an option for students, but it will never be something they desire.

Finding a balance between social life, family time, schoolwork, and work is the most challenging component of being a working student. The stress levels can be ten times higher than those who are not working; the pressure of being a working student and completing the school work is undeniably higher (Mitchell, 2016). The educational system has also changed due to an unexpected epidemic placing students and teachers in unfamiliar circumstances. As working students must put in double the effort in their work and academics, employed students find it more challenging to manage their time.

However, the abrupt change to an online learning environment provides an opportunity to narrow this gap by allowing university students to learn and work simultaneously (Ebardo & Wibowo, 2021) [13]. A mixed approach provides the most flexibility in content presentation through numerous asynchronous and synchronous teaching techniques that provide students with additional opportunities for reflection and feedback.

Due to blended learning, students can quickly and easily complete tasks at their own pace. The study from Massachusetts conducted by Kirk Carapezza (2021) [11] also reveals the positive influences of working while studying. Some students now have more freedom and focus because of the digital change, which benefits working adults and community college students who also have other life obligations.

Although blended learning benefits working students' lives, intervening forces at work still need to be addressed. In the local context of Cebu, Philippines, the two obligations were challenging for working students to balance. Payusan et al. (2022) assert that it is improbable that every student will attend every virtual session and that their absences hinder their participation in the class. Because they could prioritize their work over attending courses, working students who used this flexible learning method should have paid more attention to their academic obligations. Due to their need to work, they were obliged to work under these circumstances. It is crucial to create interventions that are precisely tailored to the issues of working students' academic performance on a blended approach and the hours they spend working.

There are limited studies of working students working in a blended learning modality. Hence, this study aims to understand the working students' whole experience from an entirely new learning perspective.

2. Methodology
2.1. Research Design
The goal of phenomenological research design is to comprehend the significance individuals attach to their experiences and investigate the essence of human experiences. It aims to capture these experiences' fundamental elements and underlying patterns without imposing prior notions or judgments (H, 2023). As such, prevailing conditions, phenomena, values, beliefs, feelings, and cause-effect relationships among variables are adequately examined and interpreted. This research aims to determine the benefits and drawbacks of a blended learning strategy on the academic achievement of working college students through live interviews and by giving out open-ended survey questionnaires to the chosen participants.

2.2. Sampling Design, Respondents, and Environment
Ten (10) working students from a state university volunteered to participate in the study and were chosen using snowball sampling Bhat (2023) [6]; the Snowball sampling method is defined as a non-probability sampling technique in which the samples contain unusual traits. This is a sampling approach in which existing individuals refer new subjects to be recruited for a research study.

2.3. Research Instrument
The researcher is an essential instrument of data gathering and analysis, according to Mbaleka (2019) [33]. Scholars have also considered the researcher's nature as an instrument as an interpreter of empirical materials involved in constructing ideas (Pezalla et al., 2012) [23]. This study's data collection method is a face-to-face interview using a semi-structured questionnaire. The questionnaire includes open-ended questions about how the blended learning approach affects the academic performance of working college students in Cebu, Philippines. Furthermore, the researchers must write and analyze the recorded responses in the findings and discussion sections.

2.4. Data Gathering Procedure
The researcher submitted an approval form from the research committee before beginning the data collection process. They then conduct a pre-interview in which they choose their interviewee, obtain their consent and approval for having their voice recorded, and receive approval for their questionnaire. The researcher recorded the interviewee's voice during the interview, and post-interview, all the recorded information obtained from the interviewee was written down.

2.5. Data Analysis
Results are analyzed using the thematic analysis approach. According to Villegas (2023), this kind of data analysis involves gathering data and looking for patterns to determine themes. There are five phases to approach Thematic Analysis: Familiarizing with the data for broader themes is where the researcher transcribes the audio data into text. Looking for themes in coding is where the researchers search for coding patterns or themes that may uncover the sub-themes and subdivisions that can be relevant to the study. Reviewing the themes is evaluating the topics and verifying whether the classified themes match the data or whether they exist or not. Finalizing themes, the analysis may take shape after reviewing and rethinking the possible themes that may match the data or study. Report writing is where data examination takes place. After getting the possible themes and codes, the researcher may start writing the results and outcome. With this, the researchers can contextualize experiences, comprehend participant views, and investigate the hidden meaning underlying respondents' behavior by reducing and classifying a large volume of data into a more relevant unit for interpretation.

2.7. Ethical Considerations
Ethical considerations are crucial to any research study. While conducting a survey, it is vital to consider the participants' well-being and protection. In this study, several ethical considerations are made clear: The participants can cancel or reject any time they want. In this study, consent is given to the participants or their legal guardians. The participants will also be given a summary of the purpose of the research and the protection of their rights and privacy. The participants are rewarded as a token of appreciation for participating in the study. Confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained by providing the participants with an alias or pen name. In addition, this study respects and honors ethical guidance while performing this study. The study protocol is submitted for honest review and approval to the appropriate ethics committee to ensure compliance with ethical and safeguarding standards of participants, their rights, and welfare.

3. Results and Discussions
Results

Table 1: Presents the codes, sample verbatim responses, categories, and themes that were identified to support the findings of the study

Codes, Sample, Verbatim Responses, Categories, and Clustering of Themes			
Codes and Sample Verbatim Responses	*Categories*	*Themes*	*Description of the Themes*
Time Management *"How to manage time is the skill that I had developed through working" (P1)* **Communication Skills** *"Communication skills, before I present my report in a monotonous tone and at a faster pace, and now I learned that I have to be cautious about my tone in presenting and also my pacing for my classmate to comprehend the lesson well" (P2)* **Self-discipline** *"Discipline on how you bring your workloads and then you have to deliver your loads to school separately." (P6)*	**Skills Acquired in Working**	*Theme 1: Skills development*	**This theme emphasized the skills that working college students have acquired.**
Financial difficulty *"To save money, school fees to be paid and embarrassed to ask from anyone" (P2)* *"The breadwinner of the family; to provide and help my mom and dad; it is my goal to finish my studies and aim high as well as aiming to be successful one day" (P7)* *"Financial problems and support myself" (P8)* **Personal decision** *"I earn for myself, so that I will not be able to ask money to buy things that I want" (P10)* *"I don't want to depend on my parents, I want to earn for myself"- (P6)* *"I have no money, and I want to earn for myself so that in the future they will not have reasons to say things badly" (P4)*	**Justification for work**	*Theme 2: Factors influencing students to work*	**College working students underline the reasons why they chose to work while studying.**
Advantages *"Yes, there are differences in traditional learning. The advantage of it is advanced learning but the downside is there are different solutions, but it comes up with the same answer. whereas, blended learning, they have a YouTube channel, and the teachers also use manipulatives to cater the students. "(P3)* *"Blended learning is advantageous in a way that it is self-directed learning in terms of modules, and activities at the same time less print and transportation fees." (P5)* *"Blended learning is very convenient compared to full face-to-face because it allows me to balance work and studying" (P7)*	**Differences of Blended and Traditional Learning Approach**	*Theme 3: Advantages of Blended Learning Approach*	**The college working students emphasizes the positive impact of Blended learning in their personal and work commitments**
• Conflicts of Time Schedule *"I disregard the opportunity to participate in other school activities such like sports due to my tight routine of school and work." – (P5)* *"graveyard schedule which is 8pm to 6am but changed to 11am to 8pm, rest day is during Wednesday and Thursday which is face-to-face class, it would interfere my work and school, having a hard time to balance, handles small clients sometimes" – (P8)* • Personal struggles *"Long travel, lack of sleep and sometimes unmotivated to answer the assignments." – (P9)* *"Sleep deprived, and conflict on meetings for group presentation" – (P2)* *"I tend to sacrifice my time" (P2)* *"I really have to sacrifice the Kudyapi dance performance because I can't afford to be late for work." – (P6)*	**Self-sacrifices and undertakings**	*Theme 4: Challenges and Struggles*	**This theme reveals the challenges and struggles that college working students have experienced.**
• Coping Mechanisms		*Theme 5:*	**This theme emphasizes**

		Personal Growth	positive factors that college working students acquired from their work.
"I was used with my routine process of working while studying." • Positive Outlook *"I was able to acquire leadership skills, although it's a heavy duty but I eventually handled two teams together in my work." (P5)* • Overcoming fears *"Honestly I'm an introvert type of person and I'm not into socializing but when I start tutoring everything has changed, my confidence has boosted allowing me to not shy anymore when talking." (P7)* • Self-development and *confidence* *"I find myself becoming more particular into details, I learned how to plan and organize with the things I do, not just in work but I learned to apply it as well in my studies." (P4)*			

Sixty-eight (68) relevant remarks were collected from the interview transcripts of the ten working college respondents. There were 40 codes, which resulted in 40 constructed meanings. The 40 codes were divided into five groups, which resulted in five themes. Working while studying is difficult, according to the participants' comments, but using a blended learning method helps them minimize the strain by allowing them to manage their time more efficiently.

Discussions
Theme 1. Skills Development
The results show that work has inserted structure into students' daily lives, develops good time management skills, and enhances their self-confidence in several areas (Summer & McCoy et al., 2023). These were notable in the statements from the selected college working participants stating;

"...communication skills, before I present my report in a monotonous tone and at a faster pace and now, I learned that I have to be cautious about my tone in presenting and also my pacing for my classmate to comprehend the lesson well"- Informant 2

"...time management, discipline, on how you bring your workloads and then you have to deliver your loads to school separately." Informant 6

This means the experience of working with college students includes essential personal development and skill building in addition to academic endeavors. Perna et al. (2017) [22] confirm that working students typically excel at time management as they must adequately balance their time between work, classes, and assignments. For college students who manage many responsibilities, developing better time management, self-discipline, and communication skills is one of the most crucial areas of personal growth. While juggling employment and school might be difficult, there are also unquestionable benefits. According to Cabanilla (2023) [10], there are fundamental life skills that students can employ in a variety of situations in their personal and professional lives. College-working students who have learned to manage the many demands and pressures of both employment and school have acquired abilities that will be useful in their academic pursuits and future careers. This implies that working while studying is beneficial for future employment success.

Theme 2. Factors influencing students to work
Results show that there are factors influencing the students to work, one of them being breadwinners, financial problems, and supporting oneself. Abenoja et al. (2019) [3] discovered that financial support, self-development, and internal motivation motivate university students to work efficiently. The responses of working students supported these:

"...breadwinner of the family; to provide and help my mom and dad; it is my goal to finish my studies and aim high as well as aiming to be successful one-day" Informant 7

"...Financial problems and support me" Informant 8

This means that the factors influencing the students to work do not hinder them from reaching their dreams and allowing them to have hesitation in achieving their dreams, even if there are hindrances. Sanchez-Gelabert et al. (2017) [24], agreed that students with inadequate financial means are the most affected by the necessity to balance job and education to obtain a university degree. Carnevale and Smith (2018) [12] highlighted that students work to support themselves, pay for college, and gain valuable experiences. Participants reported that university students strive to support their struggling households, cover basic living and educational expenses, and improve their lives. Breadwinner, financial problems, and supporting oneself are reasons students drive to work while studying. Students do not have enough money to support themselves or their families, so they work while studying. Some students work because they are the breadwinners for their families and cannot afford to study if they do not work. Some students work because their parents cannot afford school fees, or they want to help their parents. This means that with their parents' support and encouragement, they can pursue their aspirations and attain their goals. They are vital in their children's life. They guide and support the children as they grow up.

Theme 3. The Advantages of Blended Learning Approach
Integrating online and traditional teaching is called blended learning. This strategy of teaching has recently become pervasive in the education system (Muxtorjonovna, 2020). Results reveal that the blended learning approach positively impacts working students, especially in managing their time

in school and work commitments. These were notable in the statements from the selected college working students participants stating:

"...is advantageous in that it is self-directed learning in terms of modules and activities, and at the same time, there are fewer print and transportation fees." Informant 5

"...whereas blended learning, they have a YouTube channel, and the teachers also use manipulatives to cater to the students." Informant 3

This means a blended learning approach benefits college-working student (Noelle & Noelle, 2022). Waha and Davis, 2014, agree that the blended learning approach supports a range of learning styles and lifestyles. Allowing working students to balance work and school-related activities. It enables them to save money by self-studying online, while on the face-to-face set, they can interact with their teachers and peers. This suggests that blended learning can be a practical learning approach for students.

Theme 4. Challenges and Struggles
Working while studying is becoming more popular among university students (Jewel, 2014; Tumin & Faizuddin, 2017) [17m 30], according to Ansong and Gyensare (2012) [2], who consider that college students face multiple challenges and struggles in order to achieve maximum academic performance. Results reveal that the challenges and struggles that these college-working students face have significantly affected their personal and school commitments. These were notable in the statements from the selected college working students participants stating:

"...have to sacrifice the Kudyapi dance performance because I cannot afford to be late for work." - Informant 6

"...still study even during the rest day, disregard my wants like ganahan ko mo laag and to join organizations, tungod sa akong work ma-sacrifice nako siya (referring to not being able to join organizations) kay I have to balance work and study." - Informant 7

These responses indicate that work limits working students from participating in school activities and enjoying their free time. However, working students gain benefits such as personal development regardless of their struggles. Furthermore, Macquiling (2018) reveals that the desire for students to work hard is related to financial challenges, demonstrating that poverty is not a roadblock to education. The blended learning approach gives working students self-development and financial opportunities. Balancing work and academics is a working student's most significant challenge. Working students must sacrifice their personal lives because they need to work. This implies that working students may struggle to balance studying and working but having their priorities figured out will help them develop better skills such as decision-making, confidence, and time management.

Theme 5. Personal Growth
Results showed that working can lead to an advantage of being open to learning new things and skills. Respondents agreed that working can be tiring but rewarding simultaneously, for it has given them many advantages in terms of personal growth despite the difficulties and hectic schedules they faced. These were notable in the statements from the selected college working students participants stating:

"I find myself becoming more particular in details. I learned how to plan and organize the things I do, not just in work, but I learned to apply it as well in my studies." - Informant 4

"Honestly, I am an introvert, and I am not into socializing, but when I started tutoring, everything changed. My confidence was boosted, allowing me not to be shy anymore when talking." - Informant 7

These responses imply that working opportunities abound for those who successfully balance employment and education. The workplace is a hub of professional connections, allowing individuals to interact with colleagues, supervisors, and industry professionals. These connections can be instrumental in providing mentorship, guidance, and exposure to potential career paths, expanding the individual's professional horizons. Berry (2020) [9] agrees that work experiences at college can help students discover a lot about themselves, such as their skills, values, interests, and goals. Hence, balancing work and education, in another aspect, can provide students the opportunity for self-exploration and discovery, which plays a significant key role in self-growth. This implies that the impact of working on studies is not inherently wrong since it proves to have an underlying positive factor and effect on its other aspects.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations
Blended learning allows college students to balance their academic pursuits with their work, allowing them to integrate their education with their career goals and utilize skills developed through employment. However, this approach also presents challenges, such as time management, conflicting work schedules with academic ones, personal sacrifices, and maintaining a healthy work-life balance. This study suggests conducting additional research comparing the experiences of working college students who participate in blended learning to those of students who attend regular classroom settings. Institutions should widen their scope in educational approach, ensuring that students receive the support they need to succeed in their academic journey.

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