

Transitioning With MS Teams: Insights and Foresights of Graduate School Students

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ABSTRACT: *This study aimed to determine the insights and foresights of graduate school students in using MS Teams as a learning platform in the new normal. Data were obtained through in-depth analysis of responses generated through interviews and short essays from graduate school students enrolled in Statistics during the First Trimester, AY 2020-2021. Results reveal the varied experiences of students as neophyte users of the platform, and of shifting to flexible learning modality due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The built-in features of MS Teams as a learning management system were found to be beneficial. These addresses learners' needs in terms of location, interest, availability, and resources. Blended learning is found useful and sufficient. Students in this challenging times should be resourceful, flexible, resilient, adaptive to change, self-directed and motivated. Participants expressed their foresights and recommendations on how to enhance instruction through MS Teams, which were considered as input to enhance curricular delivery.*

KEYWORDS - *New normal, MSTeams, Flexible learning, Synchronous and Asynchronous learning*

I. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a physical shutdown of all types of educational institutes worldwide due to which the education delivery has now shifted to an “*online only*” exclusivity model [1]. Accordingly, various measures by the higher education providers have been initiated to implement social isolation strategies, and online teaching is followed with rapid curriculum transformation [2]. The global emergency required a quick response among educational institutions to innovate in their modalities in order for learning to continue amid the pandemic. Lederman (2020) stated that due to the COVID-19 crisis, teachers and students both find themselves in the situation where they felt compelled to embrace the digital academic experience as the summum bonum of the online teaching-learning process [3].

As SPUP practices resiliency and creativity in its program delivery, it released its Learning Continuity Plan last April, 2020. Learning arrangements to address the disruption of classes is reflected in SPUP's Flexible Learning Program. The FLP is a management and operational process that is aimed at identifying learning activities that are essential and critical; identifying potential impacts that affect critical activities; providing a framework for building resilience; and creating effective responses that will safeguard the safety and interest of the learners, and the whole SPUP Community. This is an instructional delivery platform that involves the integration of traditional classroom-based teaching, online and blended learning through the utilization of a variety of educational pedagogies that are most desirable and appropriate to the needs and capabilities of students and their environment as well as the university's learning resources [4]. Part of this is the utilization of Microsoft Teams in the graduate school level.

Microsoft Teams is a cloud app digital hub that brings channels, conversations, meetings, files and apps to Microsoft 365[5]. It is the heart of collaboration and communication within Office 365, integrating many applications and services all in one platform [6]. Microsoft Teams provides all that the modern workforce requires, such as a unified conversation platform where team members can have an open chat, voice, and video calls with optimal call quality and collaboration through content sharing [7]. It has features that work effectively with several learning management systems and applications that support the efficient conduct of online lectures and discussions as well as virtual collaborations among learners and instructors. Also, MS Teams provides the flexible communication over to students and faculty [8]. It is part of Office 365 and is included in the educational license of Office 365 available at many universities[9].

SPUP subscribes to Office 365. To maximize its features, the university supports the utilization of MS Teams as its learning platform across year levels effective First Semester, AY 2020-2021. A virtual learning platform provides a sustainable, high-quality educational infrastructure that fosters participation and collaboration [9]. The study of Buchal (2019) provides evidence that Microsoft Teams is an effective platform for collaborative knowledge building, supported by Ashby's sustainability assessment method to provide scaffolding. He claimed that students are comfortable giving and receiving constructive feedback, and they don't mind having their contributions visible to the course instructor or teaching assistant. Further, the students found MS Teams to be easy to learn and use, and more useful than other collaboration tools they have used in the past [10]. From the findings and discussion of Rojabi (2020), he concluded that online class via Microsoft Teams supports the students' learning environment optimally. Further, most respondents of the study gave their positive perception toward the students' learning environment in an online class; the positive judgment from the respondents came from their experience in online learning by using Microsoft Teams [11].

As faculty using MS Teams for the first time, and believing in its enormous benefits, the researcher gives credence to its importance in making flexible learning successful during this COVID and post-COVID era. The students in the graduate school, being neophyte users of the platform are not so familiar with the features of MS Teams as well as its learning environment. Hence, this study sought to explore the insights and foresights of graduate school students based on their experiences of using MS Teams as a learning platform in the new normal.

II. Methods

To establish answers to the objective of the study, the descriptive qualitative research design was used. The goal of the data gathering was to provide a comprehensive summary and analysis of the participants' insights and foresights on MS Teams as a learning management system in the new normal.

The study comprised of twenty-five participants who were enrolled in Statistics with Laboratory for the First Trimester, AY 2020-2021. To generate the necessary data, the researcher used open-ended questions and were substantiated through interviews on the insights and foresights of the participants in using Microsoft Teams as a learning platform. Merriam S.B. (2009) describes qualitative data analysis as simply "the process of making sense out of the data". Hence, content and narrative analysis were used in analyzing the responses of the participants. Smith, C. P. (2000), introduced two important approaches to the analysis of qualitative material. Accordingly, content analysis deals primarily with verbal material, but may be used with nonverbal material as well; narrative analysis deals only with verbal material, usually stories or accounts of personal experiences. These techniques may be used to study individuals, groups, cultures, or historical periods by means of either qualitative or quantitative research. Further, thematic analysis was used to interpret responses of the participants.

III. Results and Discussion

This study aimed to determine the insights and foresights of graduate school students in learning through MS Teams in the new normal. With the onset of COVID-19, the teaching of Statistics with Laboratory as well as other courses was held through MS Teams – the official learning platform/ modality of the graduate school.

3.1 Participants' Insights on the Use of MS Teams in Learning Statistics

3.1.1 Experiences on the use of MS Teams

Using flexible learning modalities through varied platforms/ modalities can be challenging to both teachers and learners. There is a need however, to learn and adopt in order to survive the demands of urgent instructional innovations. The first trimester of AY 2020-2021 was the first time that graduate school students were exposed to MS Teams. Their insights were documented based on their experiences in their Statistics class.

"At first, the user interface can be a bit overwhelming. I spent considerable time learning about the platform." [Participant 2]

"To be honest, it was my first time to use Microsoft Teams because in the school I am currently working at, we use Neo LMS and Zoom for meetings. At first, I was struggling because I am not so familiar with the features of the MS Teams but when several meetings were held, I became familiar with the platform." [Participant 1]

"I am currently working as a nurse here in the UAE and there were a lot of times wherein I couldn't attend our online classes due to my work schedule. However, I discovered that nothing can deter me from learning with the help of Microsoft Teams." [Participant 4]

"To be honest, I didn't know anything about MS Teams until we use it." [Participant 14]

"It's my first time to try it and of course I encountered some minimal problems with." [Participant 16]

"I am personally new to it and at first I found difficulty in using. I am still exploring and familiarizing the content of the application." [Participant 18]

The participants' claim that as beginners with MS Teams, adjustment was not easy. However, determined and motivated learners look at challenges in using the new platform as learning opportunity. Their continued exposure to the MS Teams in the conduct of synchronous as well as asynchronous meetings enabled them to adopt with the process. Pastushenko, Hruška, & Zendulka, (2018) claimed that increasing students' motivation is an essential task during the educational process [14]. The continued exposure of the students to the platform afforded them familiarity and ease in learning. Knowles, as cited by Laurian-Fitzgerald, Fitzgerald, Popa, & Bochis, (2018) asserts that adult learners are more self-directed, willing to be responsible for what they do, unwilling to have teachers impose arbitrary information on them, ready to learn, task-oriented and experienced [15].

"I can say that it is a user-friendly interface, that can help even those people who are not into the technology itself, they can easily adopt the educational platform itself." [Participant 5]

"Microsoft teams is a good avenue for online learning. It is more-engaging compared with other platforms." [Participant 7]

“It is a great application because it is a very useful tool since everything is already there.” [Participant 12]

“Microsoft Teams is a friendly user learning platform wherein it can be easily downloaded from phone, laptop, or tablet.” [Participant 15]

“As a student in my late 40’s, who spent almost all of my student life in a “face to face” form of learning, I appreciate the above advantages that Microsoft Teams can offer.” [Participant 25]

As cited by Almarzooq, Lopes, &Kochar (2020), with any new virtual initiative, technical issues are expected but can be managed as users become more familiar with the interface and local expertise emerges [16]. Further use of the platform enabled the students to appreciate the new modality, and to adjust their learning methods. This helped them in accomplishing desired outputs and learning tasks within prescribed period.Hai-Jew, S. (2020) agrees that MS Teams is a fairly complex tool [17].

3.1.2 Benefits and Features of MS Teams as a Learning Platform

MS Teams has progressed through the years.Despite entering the education arena relatively late, MS Teams and its related apps have proven a close rival to dominant systems such as Google Classroom and its associated apps [18].

“For me, MS Teams is a good platform in terms of meetings because there is no time limit unlike other platforms that you have to buy premium account to get unlimited features which is a bit pricy.” [Participant 1]

“MS teams support group collaboration, chats, video calls as well as file sharing in which I have already taken advantage of. It enables users to schedule a video or audio meetings with a single person or a team. On top of this, video calls as I have observed has no time limit, too. It can be synced with my laptop’s calendar which makes it faster and easier to join classes, and less likely that I’ll forget about one of them. During the meeting, the presenter/instructor has complete control over the participants, which is a very good resource.” [Participant 2]

“Microsoft Teams improves communication, productivity and teamwork by integrating all forms of collaboration into one single user interface this includes chats, documents, shared files, meetings.” [Participant 6]

“Microsoft Teams phone app gives me an immediate access to all the necessary attached documents for every subject that I am currently studying. Furthermore, I can easily respond to chat and conversations, join meetings with one click and continue to collaborate so I can always keep completely in the loop anywhere and anytime of the day.” [Participant 4]

“Using the MS Teams gave us the feeling of being in the classroom mentally as we can be able to see our professor and the power point presentation were presented nicely without lag.” [Participant 14]

“Built-in OneNote Class Notebooks and end-to-end assignment management allow educators to organize interactive lessons and provide effective and timely feedback.” [Participant 8]

MS Teams is well-packaged. It’s similar to a one-stop-shop where you find everything in one complete app – from synchronous meetings, chats, to students’ asynchronous tasks.It allows greater collaboration and flexibility between teachers and students as they can set meetings anytime, anywhere. Also, students have greater sense of ownership of their own learning since they do a lot of independent learning. Cheng (2002) asserts that emerging

technologies and associated practices serve to easily and democratically connect people who may have previously had little or no opportunity to connect with each other [19].

“All the features of Microsoft Teams are excellently made and built. Microsoft Teams has given me an easy-to-access online learning.” [Participant 15]

“It’s a lot easier for the user to find information that they are looking for because Its already divided into selected channels so it’s easy to view messages, documents and meetings pertaining to that particular channel.” [Participant 6]

“My professors can record the videos of our online classes for the students like me who cannot attend synchronous virtual meetings regularly.” [Participant 4]

“It offers flexibility for students who can’t attend join every meeting since classes can be recorded without any limit and it may be viewed at any time of the day.” [Participant 3]

“I appreciate it in a way that online discussion was being recorded and I found it very useful for us students because anytime and anywhere we can play it back.” [Participant 18]

“The user interface is very friendly, that I can see post, and access assignment with a single touch of my screen (using a cellphone) and with a click of a mouse (PC) I can view all our requirements.” [Participant 5]

“It is also easy and friendly to use and offers features that can assist us from doing our activities or requirements.” [Participant 20]

In terms of its features, the participants agree that Teams is beneficial to them. The recording feature of the app allows the students to review previously recorded discussions without so much difficulty, hence, one of MS Teams’ best features which is highly appreciated. Emerging practices which are used as the features of the platform are explored provide motivation to users. Hai-Jew, S. (2020) found out that the class template for a team includes various base resources: posts, files, class notebook, assignments, grades, and a wiki. The assignments tab enables the creation of assignments and quizzes, including from other existing Teams [17].

“Students can operate within their own schedule and organize activities in compliance with their own desires and needs. Furthermore, the students can revisit and repeat learning activities as necessary as compared during regular class.” [Participant 9]

“It provides a virtual classroom with real time features just like the regular face-to-face class. It gives teachers the capacity to watch conversations and mute a student if necessary.” [Participant 17]

“The features are nice. You have wall to post concerns and announcements and a reply button to communicate.” [Participant 19]

“This is the cheapest consumed data. It only requires 250 to 350MB an hour.” [Participant 19]

“Money can be saved because the application is free, and requirements are submitted online so the cost of printing and purchasing of materials for paper works is no longer needed.” [Participant 12]

“It has a highly customizable features of application and lastly there is an improved security which ensures the privacy of your documents.” [Participant 21]

MS Teams allow students and teachers to easily interact with one another. As part of the Office365 ecosystem, it is an application that serves teamwork [20]. Yen & Nhi (2021) claims that it has an outstanding feature of displaying the most recently interacting group work content so that users are always up to date with the group's activities. Data wise, compared to other LMS, the participants find MS Teams to be cost effective. Likewise, distance is not a barrier to learning, as it can happen anywhere and anytime of the day. In the study of Hai-Jew, (2020), successful learning experience in MS Teams is not based on the technology but the learners and the instructor. This requires connectivism, active collaboration, more independent learning, and greater flexibility on both teachers and students.

3.1.3 Perceived Disadvantages

While there were a lot of notable features of the platform, participants view internet connectivity as a major requirement. Jurado, et.al., (2010) as cited by Af'Idatul Husniyah (2018) claimed that limited internet access is a major concern in implementing blended learning [21]. The same is true with the case of some participants living in rural and remote areas. Learners can quickly adopt with any digital means of learning in the new normal, provided they have strong connectivity.

“But I think the only downside of this application is you need to have stable internet connection like Wi-Fi.” [Participant 6]

“We need to have internet connection wherever we are so that we can have access to it.” [Participant 10]

“Since it requires usage of internet connections, most of us do not have a stable internet connection that sometimes results in not attending the class schedule.” [Participant 11]

“One needs a good internet service.” [Participant 17]

In the study of Baticulon, et. al (2021), they found out that the availability of fast and reliable internet connection was bigger concern than either device ownership or technical aptitude [22].

3.2 Participants' Impressions and Foresights on the Use of MS Teams in Learning Statistics

Though first-time users of the platform, the participants view MS Teams as a good alternative in blended learning. They have detailed out their views which include:

“Using Microsoft teams as a platform for distant learning can be convenient in lots of ways.” [Participant 3]

“The effectivity of an educational platform in learning depends on the person who wants to learn; it is up to him to adopt to the nature of the platform. We can always utilize different social media platform or even technologies that are present in this time to reach out to other people, I am glad to use MS Teams as a learning platform, but I will not stop there.” [Participant 5]

“So far I'm impressed with the MS Teams and I look forward in discovering more features of this platform.” [Participant 1]

“For me, I think that it is one of the best educational platforms I have used.” [Participant 5]

"It's a great platform to express your emotions and it adds some fun to your daily interactions. Overall, I recommend this mobile application conducive for online class." [Participant 6]

"With MS Teams, we make things easy especially for employed students. We attend meetings and classes while at work and submit reports and assignments without neglecting the other." [Participant 10]

"So far, I have been enjoying my online class using the Microsoft Teams. Further, it is secured and is user-friendly." [Participant 7]

"MS Teams helps me a lot in organizing everything at work and in my study for it is user-friendly. Software like MS Teams help us to reach our goals even in times of pandemic." [Participant 23]

These feedbacks coming from newbies of the platform give a positive impression on the potential success of MS Teams in education. The participants found convenience in using the platform. Lansmann, Schallenmüller, & Rigby (2019) perceives MS Teams as making work easier and more efficient. MS Teams is on the rise to become the major tool for communication and collaboration [23].

"Microsoft Teams is really offering compact service to accommodate our needs as students in coping up in learning online." [Participant 9]

"Microsoft Teams does not only keep online learning organized, it also makes education very accessible." [Participant 13]

"I am amazed with the application because it can accommodate almost all the students during video online class. It is a medium where you can interact with your classmate and your teacher." [Participant 18]

"The Microsoft Teams as a learning platform is an excellent means of fostering interrelationships among students while giving them an avenue to learn in groups and online tools to learn and share ideas with one another." [Participant 20]

MS Teams excels in different types of communications (chat, videoconferencing, lecturing, screen sharing), and is superior in general content creation [24]. Ngoc and Phung (2021) found that students taking online courses via MS Teams interacted with friends only when they were required to work in pairs or groups [25]. It has to be noted that successful learning experiences in MS Teams is not based on the technology but the learners and the instructor [17].

"Using this application is a great help for us to continue learning especially that face to face interaction is not allowed at the moment to avoid the spread of pandemic." [Participant 11]

"Microsoft Teams as a learning platform truly provided me a workable educational environment in trying and stressful times especially during this pandemic." [Participant 15]

"MS Teams will be our future hope in terms of online communications and transactions. It is safe and highly recommendable to the end users." [Participant 21]

"I am beginning to like Microsoft Teams now, because I felt it is more complete, and unified in terms of the different communication tool put into one application." [Participant 24]

Generally, the participants are positive that MSTeams could be the platform for education to continue in this post-COVID era. Continual exploration of its features allows them to appreciate the benefits derived there in. Microsoft Teams provides all that the modern workforce requires, such as a unified conversation platform where team members can have an open chat, voice, and video calls with optimal call quality and collaboration through content sharing[7]. As predicted by Tsai (2018), Microsoft Teams will experience the most growth over the next two years [26].

IV. Conclusions and Future Works

MS Teams have provided quality access to learning in the Graduate School this COVID and post-COVID era. The transition from face-to-face to blended/online learning accorded the smooth shift in instructional delivery. The integration of diverse technology in education provides various competitive opportunities among educators and students to explore, innovate, implement, and adopt desired changes in the academe. In as much as there is still a lot to be learned as the features of the platform are explored, serious attention must be considered, to include continuous orientation and upskilling of faculty and students on this learning management system, monitoring of its implementation, and assessment and evaluation on the extent of academic success. Factors that affect successful integration of the LMS as well as those affecting effective assimilation of learning in the academic process must likewise be explored. Further, there is a need for strong collaboration between teachers and students, as this bridge the gaps in achieving the goals of online learning, and eventually championing MS Teams.

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