Students' School Engagement in Face-to-Face Set-Up

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 Pandemic changes the ways of social connections and gathering. For the past two years, students have acquired knowledge through Learning Management Systems. Subjects' contents and student outputs are presented virtually. Different pandemic stories of learning and engagement success and failures emerge and shape the perception of students affecting their thoughts, motivation, emotional responses, relationships, the way transactions are done at home, and how engagements are expected at school. This paper aims to understand and design a program for students returning to an on-site learning set-up and implement student activity protocols to assess, and process students' experience from activities and events participated in an online mode. Descriptive statistics are used to describe the response and participation of the respondents in the survey, and the interpretations were based on the sentiment analysis of thoughts and feelings about returning to full implementation of on-campus classes and non-academic school activities. Gaps between academic and non-academic engagements are discussed. Results describe the condition of the respondents, which are necessary for academic faculty and event organizers.

Keywords: Student engagement, program design for re-engagement, post-pandemic program development

INTRODUCTION

Unlike the usual return to school after a typhoon, the COVID-19 Pandemic is different in many ways. During the Pandemic, people got used to working and studying from home. And for the last two years, this set-up is becoming more convenient for students, whether in class learning or attending school non-academic activities.

The Commission on Higher Education's (CHED) announcement of 100% utilization of school facilities created various concerns from students and school employees. At De La Salle University, academic service providers' sentiments about returning to work are primarily negative and suggest a flexible working arrangement. General concern over health and safety protocols was expressed (DLSU Survey, 2022).

The predicaments are valid due to the rising COVID-19 case midyear of 2022. It can be challenging to focus at work. At the same time, contracting the virus to and from the workplace may compromise the health and safety of the family the employees go home to. The everyday ordeal with anxieties and worries traveling to and from school is a concern the organizations must be addressed. While the majority is for flexible academic arrangements, this paper explores the thoughts and feelings of students on the eventual return to school.

The Covid-19 Pandemic stops experiential learning in class and laboratories. The non-academic social and community gathering events are held on online platforms. Group meetings, class group interactions, and student organization events are done using electronic devices. With video and microphones on, participants are seen and heard, and people are provided the option to be seen through their video cameras or not. With these realities of the Pandemic, new strategies are formed to capture learning, participation, and engagement (Ramos and Soliven, 2021). One advantage of the online learning and gathering platforms is the opportunities for students to participate in events from different parts of the world that can be seen in LMS,

MOOCs, and social media platforms. These activities can reach many participants, and online training and learning activities defy traditional classroom learning sessions. Unlike the in-classroom activities, LMS can capture more attendees and their engagement to asynchronous modules simultaneously while considering that the non-face-to-face (NFTF) meetings could hamper the effectiveness of an event and even fail to meet the participant's expectations (Sergio and Penedo, 2018). School re-engagement can be challenging with the advantages of online learning and training. The isolation brought by the Pandemic may have hampered the development of belongingness and hindered student engagement in the University (Lawson & Lawson, 2020).

This paper explores students' sentiments and develops a hypothesis on the mechanism of school re-engagement. Understanding educational engagement from the work of Rajasekaran & Reyes (2019) refers to school engagement as a relational, person-context construct that develops as a function of daily interactions between a developing young person and their experiences in various academic and social activities and with different individuals. A student's level of this engagement, demonstrated by the interest, psychological investment, and active effort students direct toward learning and educational attainment, proves a multidimensional construct, including three components: behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement.

With this, it is crucial to capture the response of students. These data can be analyzed for the benefit of program developers and formators to increase school engagement. According to educational neuroscience expert Dr. David Sousa (2016), student engagement can be defined as "the amount of attention, interest, curiosity, and positive emotional connections that students have when they are learning, whether in the classroom or on their own ." The thought and emotions of students as regards to face to face learning when analyzed may explain their attendance and completion of assignments, social engagements, and involvement in collaborative academic and non-academic activities.

Student Engagement Post-Pandemic

After several long months of remote learning – more than a year for some – school officials report that many students have become more passive, have a lesser sense of social belonging, and feel disengaged from their learning (Toth, 2021). The EdWeek Research Center surveyed students and teachers after the first half of this school year and found that student motivation and morale were significantly lower than before the Pandemic (2021).

Student engagement remains vital to learning and achievement, and faculty and academic support groups will likely need to find new ways to motivate and engage students. Student engagement indicates the importance of student engagement, and it cannot be underestimated as engagement affects student achievement and students' futures, and it can potentially help close COVID-19 learning gaps.

Moreover, student engagement encourages skills and habits that give students a better chance of success once they leave school. A longitudinal study of Australian students ages 9-15 found that 20 years later, those who had higher childhood school engagement were more likely to achieve a higher adult occupational status than those who were less engaged in school (Abbot-Chapman et al., 2014).

This paper aims to design and develop a school re-engagement program to maintain and build student engagement to support learners in the hybrid courses and school activities by exploring the sentiments of students stated in the following research questions:

1. What are your thoughts about returning to full implementation of on-campus classes?
2. What are your feelings about returning to full implementation of on-campus classes?
3. What do you think about returning to a face-to-face class set-up?

4. What do you feel about attending in-campus school activities?

METHODOLOGY

The researchers created an online survey questionnaire to describe the students' responses to their thoughts and feelings about the face-to-face school activities.

Survey Questionnaire

The survey questionnaire was prepared using Google forms and distributed online by sharing the target respondents' links. The respondents are 18 to 21 years of age and are currently enrolled at the time of this study. A total of 70 participants responded with a balanced count of male and female respondents. An introductory message is initially presented in the questionnaire explaining the study's rationale and the importance of voluntary participation. Consent was obtained.

The thoughts and feelings of the respondents were explored by asking them about their thoughts and feelings on the upcoming face-to-face classroom learning set-up and school activities.

Data obtained from the survey were kept in the Google drive of the proponents subject to the data privacy guidelines of the University.

Data Analysis

A total of 70 answered the survey. A thematic analysis approach using Microsoft Excel was used. Thematic analysis is a well-known method used in qualitative research applied to a set of text transcripts.

The result of this work was guided by the Sentiment Analysis framework, as shown in Figure 1. Sentiment analysis (or opinion mining) is a natural language processing (NLO) technique used to determine whether data is positive, negative, or neutral (Umarami, Julian, and Deepa, 2021). It follows the Input-Process-Output (IPO) model wherein the inputs are the participants' survey responses; the process includes preprocessing before the VADER – Natural Language Processing (NLP), and the outputs are grouped into positive, negative, and neutral sentiments. Descriptive statistics are used to quantify feelings respectively. All responses were given consent via a data privacy clause, and respondents are held anonymously in this paper.

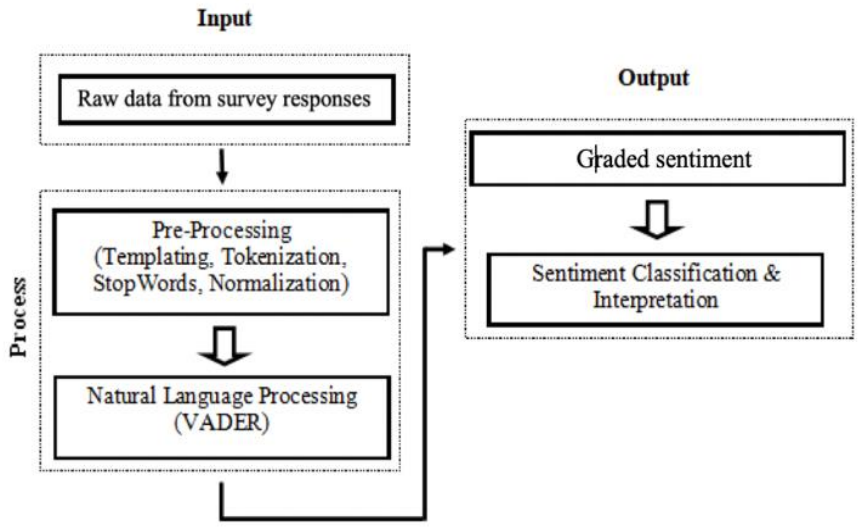

Figure 1: Framework of the Study

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The responses of the participants were obtained from the shared google forms, which were participated by 70 students across the different student groups under Student Affairs. The survey questionnaire concerns the transition from virtual to on-campus learning and student activities.

The text responses were preprocessed by templating them in Microsoft Excel, where Text Data (survey responses) are numerically tagged with their respective IDs. The tokenization process breaks down the paragraphs into smaller chunks, such as sentences or words. Inappropriate texts and those without significant meaning are removed using the *Stop Words* command. This process helps in reducing the noise in the text data. Normalization does lemmatization which reduces the words to their root word. Once the texts are ready, they are fed into the VADER natural language processing algorithm that produces the word clouds and the compound scores, which describe the sentiment scores for tokenized documents. Compound scores are normalized between -1 to 1. Values closer to 1 are positively connotated sentiments, while values more relative to -1 are negatively connotated sentiments. Zero values are neutral sentiments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The areas of the survey respondents include the thoughts about returning to full implementation of on-campus classes; and the thoughts and feelings about attending in-campus school activities.

Table 1 shows the responses under the positive, negative, and neutral sentiments for returning to full implementation of In-campus classes.

Table 1: Summary of Responses per Survey Area on Thoughts

Survey Area	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Total
Thoughts about returning to full implementation of on-campus classes	35	18 (25.71%)	17 (24.28%)	70
	-50%			-100%
Feelings about returning to full implementation of on-campus classes	26 (37.14%)	31 (44.28%)	13	70
			(18.57%	-100%

The table shows that 50% of the respondents have positive thoughts about returning to full implementation of on-campus classes, while 44.28% of the respondents have neutral feelings about returning to full implementation of on-campus classes. The respondents see the need for the school to implement the return to on-campus classes as this will help them transition to the new normal. This will help them in their academic life and better understanding of the lessons. Laboratory classes are seen also to be better held on campus in order to maximize their learning experience. However, some would perceive the return to face to face as neutral since the threat of the pandemic is still present. The feelings of both excitement and anxiety are expressed by the respondents.

Only 24.28% of the respondents have negative thoughts about returning to full implementation of on-campus classes, and 18.57% of the respondents have negative feelings about returning to full implementation of on-campus classes. The fear of getting the virus has been the most common reason why students wouldn't want to have the full implementation of on campus classes. Students also are hoping that health protocols will still strictly be implemented even if they will be required to have face to face classes. Other factors like classroom set up, increase in fuel and transportation prices, fear, and being overwhelmed create negative feelings towards the full implementation of face to face classes.

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Table 2 shows the responses under the positive, negative, and neutral sentiments for attending In-Campus student activities.

Table 2: Summary of Responses per Survey Area on Emotions

Survey Area	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Total
Thoughts about attending in-campus student activities	25 (36.71%)	31 (44.28%)	14	70
			-20%	-100%
Feelings about attending in- campus student activities	49	16 (22.85%)	5	70
	-70%		-7.14%	-100%

The table shows that 44.28% of the respondents have neutral thoughts about attending in-campus student activities, while 70% of the respondents have positive feelings about attending in-campus student activities. The results have shown that although students think that in-campus student activities will be helpful for them, they still are worried about how the activities will be conducted. The overwhelming feelings of excitement and longing to hold student activities on campus again and meet their professors, classmates and friends again are present, but for some, the limitations of having physical activities on campus student activities is still a source of worry.

Only 20% of the respondents have negative thoughts about attending in-campus activities, while 7.14% of the respondents have negative feelings about attending in-campus student activities. University life for them will not be complete if student activities are not present, but some would be worried and not be happy to return back to normal college life and attend in-campus student activities if there will be too much presence of students in campus.

Table 3 shows the responses for cognitive-emotional responses towards face-to-face classes and attendance at school activities.

Table 3: Cognitive-Emotional Sentiments

Survey Area	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Total
Cognitive-Emotional Sentiments for F2F Classes	43.57%	35%	21.42%	100%
Cognitive-Emotional Sentiments for in-campus School Activities	52.85%	33.57%	13.57%	100%

The table shows that students thought and felt more comfortable participating in on-campus school activities (52.85%) than attending face-to-face classes (43.57%). Responses indicate students' excitement to be and feel the campus with students who have been isolated for a long time, effectively socialize and engage with the community and create memories of college life. These indicate students' needs to belong and connect (Allen and Kern, 2019). Social Connections are a core human need. The experience of feeling connected to others increases the level of care for self and others. Students' drive to connect with others in the Pandemic is embedded in the desire to remain calm despite life's struggles.

Since the lockdowns, students have been socially distancing and studying from home. Having lost practice of transacting with classmates in person, like looking them in the eyes instead of looking at the panel of windows on the screen and engaging in in-person conversation rather than sending emails and group messages, these may be initially challenging. The students have reframed their thoughts and emotions from doubts, fears, and anxieties to intentional desire and excitement to re-establish social interactions. People can be strengthened through the Pandemic. For example, Hawke et al. (2020) found that more than 40% of their teen and early adult sample reported improved social relationships, greater self-reflection, and

excellent self-care.

The cognitive-emotion responses indicate a willingness to participate actively to make up for the lost experiences of the past years, supports Sinclair's cognitive reframing (2016), which has been an effective coping strategy brought on by the Pandemic as helpful, including increased awareness of the need for wellness and stronger relationships. However, negative cognitive-emotional responses to face-to-case classes anticipate negative perceptions, fears, and worries. Many were worried about how the Pandemic affected their education and social connections, and student support should be tailored accordingly, increasing their resiliency and motivation to re-engage in academic endeavors.

CONCLUSION

Students' school engagement in classes and student activities can be evaluated and improved through the participants' survey responses. Academic Service groups and formators could base program development on students' sentiments and design interventions to develop, increase, and maintain students' school engagement. As the school transitions to Face-to-Face learning in the next Academic Year, the program development may support the academic faculty in facilitating intellectual engagement and school involvement. To end, supportive of Student Affairs programs, students' sentiment could provide more insights to the organizers, module developers, and speakers on what to expect and form students for academic rigors of the University and their professional life after college. The study recommends to frame the intervention following the prevention-based psychology to teach students the skills that will enable them to prevent distress and promotion-based psychology to enable students build congruency and well-being.

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