University Students' Virtual Experiences in the Civic Welfare Training Service (CWTS) Course

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Introduction

As the World Wide Web (WWW) develops prominence through the years, it has become a powerful and useful instructional medium (Robertson, Grant, & Jackson, 2005; Oliver, Herrington & Omari, 1996). As the new language of instruction, it provides easy access to information, flexible storage, display options and publications. Through its search engines, users are given a wide range of opportunities to join forums, read and post messages, prepare and present multimedia reports, and take quizzes via email (Oakes, 1997), among others. Moreover, students with previous experience in distance learning felt more comfortable in the use of computers, thus providing them with a more egalitarian learning environment. Such an environment has encouraged students to think independently without struggling to learn at their own pace.

With its multifaceted array of features, response from the education sector has been strong and immense. Many universities around the world have invested time, money, and manpower in Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL) and e-learning courses (Naidu & Järvelä, 2006; Oakes, 1997) in the areas of Languages, Mathematics, Science and Social Sciences, among others. However, the statement that college students can be satisfactorily educated by this electronic means of learning is yet to be demonstrated (Muirhead, 2000).

The emergence of on-line courses as an alternative platform of delivery of instruction has opened an entire new avenue of learning. Previously uninteresting courses presented through lecture method now have a chance to serve students' needs once **multimedia** and **interactivity** were infused into the otherwise mundane lessons. Multimedia has been associated with fun and ease, thus catering to the already increasingly homogenous student cohort (Herrington & Oliver, 1997; Andrewartha & Wilmot, 2001). With video, audio, images, and animation features integrated in today's instruction, students' interest to be virtually engaged in learning is no longer a problem.

However, the problem of lack of face-to-face interaction is prevalent in many distance-learning courses, leading to negative educational experiences such as social isolation and impersonal student environment (Muirhead, 2000; Hughes & Hewson, 1998). Interactivity is said to be the missing element in distance education, solving the said problem with the ability of students to "talk" to their instructors and ask them about concerns they would otherwise be too afraid to ask face-to-face. This physical anonymity is a great equalizer (Curtin, 2002; Brown, 1997).

While attempts have been made by most colleges and universities in translating some of their regular and classroom based courses to on-line mode across the globe, an on-line delivery in civic welfare training in the university level was initiated by the oldest university in Asia. This on-line initiative called the Civic Welfare Training Service (CWTS) is a branch of NSTP or National Service Training Program – a program enacted by the National Service Training Program Act (RA 9163), which mandates colleges and universities to offer this course in the hope of promoting civic consciousness among college students. Students are trained to actively participate in programs and activities contributory to the general welfare and betterment of life in the community. The first part of the course prepares the students for this service.

Capitalizing on the university's e-Learning Access Program (e-LeAP) which started in 2002 (Bongalos, Bulaon, Celedonio, de Guzman, Ogarre, 2005), students enrolled in CWTS are now being prepared to serve the

community via interactive Flash modules, an on-line discussion board, and on-line assessment.

The course itself is not merely on-line. Only the first semester of the one year course is delivered on-line. Lessons are presented on Flash modules and students are evaluated, using HTML forms. Results of each test are given after the test. The purpose of the on-line portion of the course is to prepare students for actual service which takes place during the second semester. This service aims to promote socio-civic awareness through community work and the betterment of the community members.

Four years later, despite an estimated average of 15,000 enrollees in the on-line course yearly, there have been no researches intended to explore the virtual experiences of students. To date, little is still known about students in this on-line training program, and their experiences and exposure. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to narrate the virtual experiences of university students in the Civic Welfare Training Service (CWTS) course at the University of Santo Tomas.

Review of Related Literature

Recent years witnessed the development of web-enhanced courses. Although the internet started in the 1970's, it was not until recent years when the idea of on-line courses was fully explored and pursued. Since then, it has evolved into a complex system with rules, concepts and theories. Brown (1997) wrote a paper about an on-line course entitled *Economics Thought and Controversy* in Murdoch University, Perth, Western Australia. She explored the new learning demands on students in on-line courses which optimize the teaching and learning process through an on-line delivery mode. She limited the list to three central features to improve an on-line course as a hypertext, an active collaborative learning and learner-centered. *Hypertextual organization* is essential to self-directed learning for it encourages students to take an active part in their learning activities. The interface design is sensitive to *learner* needs and links all elements in a coherent, meaningful and helpful way for students.

Oliver and Omari (1999) explored the practical issues associated with teaching and learning and described the responses and perceptions of the learners. The quantitative approach was used in this study with delineated factors such as on-line technologies, learner perceptions, learner responses and on-line problem based learning. The locus of the study was Edith Cowan University, Mt. Lawley 6050 Western Australia. Results of the study showed that the students responded very positively to the change of learning environment despite the fact that it caused them to spend more time in these courses doing different activities to which they were accustomed.

Brent Muirhead (2000), for his part, examined factors that compose student autonomy, diversity, and variation in his study of respondents in an IFETS (on-line) discussion list which started from August 25, 2000 to September 8, 2000. In this qualitative research, he evaluated the importance of social interaction in web-based courses and acknowledged the importance of an instructional support system that provides effective assistance to students. He also stated that since the student population is increasingly diverse, effective planning in developing courses needs an accurate profile of learner needs. Students must develop their self-directed learning skills and adapt their communication habits to on-line learning. Educators play a vital instructional role in promoting consistent and relevant interaction between students and tutors.

In 2001, Andrewartha and Wilmot of Deakin University sought a multimedia solution to replace traditional face-to-face lectures. In this quantitative research, the researchers studied the effects of multimedia on the learning process and compared it to lessons presented in the traditional manner. The study aimed to determine whether the multimedia program would provide an educationally better solution compared to the face to face lecture. As reported, asynchronous delivery provided decisive advantages for both students and teachers. Students enjoyed the experience and test results indicated learning outcomes, as favorable as those from lectures, and teachers agree that the program caters more to an increasingly less homogenous student cohort.

Jennifer Curtin (2002) of Monash University investigated whether a computer based tutorial setting can be used as a tool for learning and a tool

for delivery of information. An examination of whether on-line tutorials can be used to encourage students to undertake the readings, distinguish the evidence and arguments of these, and relate ideas to everyday experiences through discussion (WebCT) in an on-line environment using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The paper proposed that the bulletin board within WebCT had significant potential to promote interactivity among students and build a broad sense of community among students besides what occurs in the traditional classroom. The bulletin board computer based tutorial setting can be used as a tool for learning only when principles of 'good teaching' are observed to facilitate the development of independent learners.

In 2003, Herrington, Oliver and Reeves wrote a paper on patterns of engagement in a web-based learning environment. They examined ten characteristics of authentic activities based on educational theory and research. While interviewing respondents in Edith Cowan University, Western Australia, they discussed the patterns of engagement that emerged from their own research on authentic learning tasks. They stated the need for students to be supported in the early weeks of immersion in student-centered learning environments is not only found in traditional courses but in on-line courses as well. It is doubly important in on-line courses because isolation can be an added mitigating factor against successful engagement with the course. They mentioned two ways to do this: teacher support and pear scaffolding. Authentic learning settings can provide strong supports for learners. They can motivate and encourage learner participation by facilitating students' willing suspension of disbelief. In this way, students become more immersed in the setting and such immersion can provide the motivation needed for initial perseverance. Once students overcome the initially uncomfortable settings (through support from teachers and peers), they can develop the forms of familiarity and the skill sets required in order that the authentic setting no longer provides a distraction from the cognitive engagement that higher order learning requires.

Bongalos et al (2005) gave a detailed recording of various experiences of college professors, using the Blackboard System in developing, implementing, and evaluating courseware in the University of Santo Tomas in España, Manila, Philippines. First, the teacher's pre-

courseware practices in which attitudes influenced the different instructional strategies they used to increase students' interactivity with course materials, assignments, and engagement in discussions. Moreover, teachers' experiences in the design, development, implementation, and evaluation of the material made them realize that courseware is only an instructional supplement for enhancing lesson delivery. They believe that teachers feel they will be more empowered if institutionalization of courseware development is made part of the university's curricular platform.

Naidu and Järvelä (2006) examined the subject of CMC content analysis, including an examination of what is involved in the analysis of CMC content, schemes and frameworks for analyzing them, and knowledge building within such contexts. Computer mediated communication (CMC) refers to communication between individuals and among groups via networked computers. Such forms of communication can be asynchronous or synchronous and serve a wide variety of useful functions ranging from administration to developing understanding and knowledge. The study was qualitative and took place in both the University of Melbourne, Australia, and in the University of Oulu, Finland. Consistent is the claim that using multiple methodologies is beneficial to better understand learning in dynamic on-line learning contexts. Combining methodologies from different related researches has been found useful to reveal ambiguities, contradictions and paradoxes, which in turn, have led to new conceptual developments and also increased dangers for confusion in different epistemological perspectives. From a pragmatic perspective, it may be more important to mix traditions, particularly if the aim is to improve understanding and, ultimately, educational practice, but still not in the cost of theological coherence or validity of empirical research as strongly emphasized in this special issue.

Method

Respondents

Respondents of this qualitative study were twenty (20) university students representing different colleges at the University of Santo Tomas,

sampled purposively. These respondents all took the on-line CWTS course. As presented in Table 1.1, most of the respondents were 19 years old (45%), studying in the College of Education (65%), took the on-line course in Academic Year 2004-2005 (75%), and were in their sophomore year (95%) at that time. Almost half (45%) of the respondents received a grade between 1.25 and 1.5. When asked about their previous experience in Computer use, all (100%) of them had computer subjects in their Secondary Education, while most (95%) have computers at home. Seventy-five per cent (75%) have access to the internet at home, and 50%, access computers several times a week. Most only have time to use the computer at night (90%).

Table 1.2 indicates the capability of the respondents in Computer use. The table shows the frequency with which the respondents engage in various internet-based activities, ranked from the easiest to the most difficult. Fifty-five per cent (55%) said they "always" surfed the web, 25% answered "often", 15% answered "sometimes", and 5% answered "rarely". In using search engines, 80% said they "always" do this, 10% answered "often", 5% answered "sometimes", and another 5% "rarely". Seventy-five per cent (75%) said they "always" checked their e-Mail, 15% answered "rarely", and 10% said "sometimes". As to participating in web-based forums and message boards, 45% said they only do it "sometimes". Another 45% answered "rarely", 5% answered "always", and 5% have "never" done it. Forty-five per cent (45%) of the respondents said they "rarely" play on-line games, while 30% answered "sometimes". Ten per cent (10%) answered "always", another 10% answered "often" while 5% of the respondents have "never" tried it. Finally, when asked how often they use the internet to develop or manage a website, 55% of the respondents answered "rarely", 35% answered "never", while only 10% answered "always".

All the respondents (100%) were adept in Word Processors (Microsoft Word) and Presentations (Microsoft PowerPoint). Most of the respondents (90%) considered themselves knowledgeable in Spreadsheets (90%). Eighty per cent (80%) knew how to use Picture Editors such as Adobe Photoshop and Microsoft Photo Editor, while only 35% knew how to produce publications (Microsoft Publisher, Adobe PageMaker).

Instrumentation and Data Collection

A two-part researcher-developed instrument was prepared for gathering the needed data. Preliminarily, a group of intended respondents were made to answer a two-page checklist (See Tables 1.1-1.2) called the *robotfoto* (Dutch, directly translates to 'cartographic sketch') (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2001). This profiles them individually to determine if they qualify for the study. Of the thirty (30) target respondents, only twenty (20) met the criterion for interview guided by an *aide-memoir* – the second part of the instrument consists of twenty-one (21) base questions, divided further into three categories, namely: pre, during, and post-instruction. This was administered at the respondent's most convenient time and chosen venue to elicit more natural responses. Prior to the interview, permission was sought to audio and/or video-tape the interview for accuracy of transcription. Interviews ranged from short such as thirty (30) minutes and as long as an hour and thirty minutes. The audio and video tapes recorded from the interviews were then later transcribed, analyzed, and thematized.

Table 1.1

Demographic Characteristics of Study Respondents

Profile	n	%	Profile	n	%
Age			**Grade Received**		
16	0	0%	1.0	1	5%
17	0	0%	1.25 – 1.5	9	45%
18	4	20%	1.75 – 2.25	8	40%
19	9	45%	2.50	1	5%
20	6	30%	2.75	1	5%
21 and above	1	5%	3.0	0	0%
			5.0	0	0%
College enrolled in			Incomplete	0	0%
Arts and Letters	1	5%	FA/WP	0	0%
Architecture	1	5%			
Commerce and Accountancy	0	0%	**Computer subject in high school**		
Education	13	65%	Yes	20	100%
Fine Arts	0	0%	No	0	0%

Profile	n	%	Profile	n	%
College enrolled in					
IPEA	0	0%			
Music	0	0%	**Computer at home**		
Nursing	0	0%	Yes	19	95%
Pharmacy	3	15%	No	1	5%
Rehabilitation Sciences	2	10%			
			Internet connection at home		
Academic year you took up CWTS				Yes	15 75%
2003 – 2004	3	15%	No	5	25%
2004 – 2005	15	75%			
2005 – 2006	2	10%	**Frequency of Internet Access**		
			Once a month	1	5%
Year level you took up CWTS			Every couple of weeks	2	10%
Second Year	19	95%	Once a week	2	10%
Third Year	1	5%	Several times a week	10	50%
Fourth Year	0	0%	Daily	5	25%
			Time of Computer Usage		
			AM	2	10%
			PM	18	90%

Table 1.2

Frequency of Internet-based Activities and Familiarity with Computer Applications

Profile	n	%	Profile	n	%
Frequency of Use					
Surfing the Web			**Using Search Engines**		
Always	11	55%	Always	16	80%
Often	5	25%	Often	2	10%
Sometimes	3	15%	Sometimes	1	5%
Rarely	1	5%	Rarely	1	5%
Never	0	0%	Never	0	0%

Profile	n	%	Profile	n	%
Checking e-Mail			**Participating in Forums / Message Boards**		
Always	15	75%	Always	1	5%
Often	0	0%	Often	0	0%
Sometimes	2	10%	Sometimes	9	45%
Rarely	3	15%	Rarely	9	45%
Never	0	0%	Never	1	5%
Internet Gaming			**Website Development and Management**		
Always	2	10%	Always	2	10%
Often	2	10%	Often	0	0%
Sometimes	6	30%	Sometimes	0	0%
Rarely	9	45%	Rarely	11	55%
Never	1	5%	Never	7	35%
Computer Applications*					
Word Processors	20	100%			
Spreadsheets	18	90%			
Presentations	20	100%			
Publications	7	35%			
Picture Editors	16	80%			

** Multiple Responses*

Data Analysis

In this study, the typological 'coding' method (Hatch, 2002) was used. Data sets were coded into categories based on the transcribed answers of the respondents. The steps in the analyzing process were verbatim transcription, coding, and categorizing. Additionally, an overview grid was constructed independently as a descriptive summary of the respondent's answers. Finally, the essence of the data was condensed and highlighted.

Findings

Based on the response, findings of this study were categorized into three major phases namely: (1) Pre-instruction, (2) During instruction, and (3) Post-instruction.

Pre-Instruction

Different people have different viewpoints. What works for one may not always work for another. In a course in which thousands of students enroll every year, there has been increased heterogeneity in students' opinions on the course. It is interesting to note that almost everyone had an opinion towards the on-line course even before the first day of instruction. As in testing a product, many people rely on what others say about it. One respondent narrates: "*I asked the higher classmen about CWTS."*

In the *robotfoto*, respondents were evaluated on their competency in internet activities (See Table 1.2). Interestingly, respondents who frequently engaged in internet activities ordinarily had constructive notions. Respondent who answered "always" in all items had this to first impression: *"It would be easy and hassle-free."*

Table 2 shows the university students' thoughts about CWTS prior to the course as highlighted by significant responses.

Table 2.

University Student's Preconceived Notions of CWTS

Preconceived Notions	Significant Statements
Constructive (Easy, interesting, exciting, convenient)	"A less taxing way of learning." "Interesting and exciting because I will be able to learn through technology." "It is more interactive and not boring." "I was very much relieved because … we don't have to come to UST every weekend."
Degenerative (Prone to ineffective learning, decreased social interaction, unimportant)	"I will have high grades because I can ask for help." "It eliminated the humanness of education since you don't need to be physically present." "I didn't expect to learn a lot from it. I didn't think of it as a real subject."

During Instruction

Every activity university students go through at the start of instruction is evaluative in nature. Students start to assess if the new learning environment will be effective.

Groups. For some parts of the course, the activities are done in groups. These groupings are dictated by the course facilitator. Many of the respondents enjoyed working with other university students.

"I find working in groups enjoying and fun."

"I find my group mates very friendly and approachable. They were kind to me."

When asked which unique features of the on-line course they liked most, a number of the respondents said they enjoyed social interaction within the site.

"I enjoyed the Tambayan *corner. It's like a forum wherein you can say anything you want…"*

"I think chatting with classmates on-line and participating in forums was what kept it interesting."

"I like the idea of chatting with people, sharing with them ideas and learning from them."

By participating in the forums in the CWTS main page, students had a chance to socialize and exchange ideas with their fellow students. As one student narrates, *"It's a unique way to converse with people and learn from them in an unconventional way."*

However, when heterogeneity of the respondents was probed, not everyone was as pleased with the groups.

"It was harder to do group activities compared to individual activities because my group mates didn't cooperate"

"We represented different colleges and we rarely get to meet on-line."

Some had even worse experiences. As one student writes,

"I didn't have any encounter with my group mates."

Individual Results. Individually, results are more tangible. When asked which part of the course they enjoyed most, majority of the responses could be grouped into two major themes, namely: (1) convenience and (2) accessibility.

Convenience. Based on the premise that the modules and quizzes could be accessed anytime, and anywhere, students could learn the lessons without attending classes in the university. This is paricularly important for students who reside outside the borders of the capital city.

"If ever there was no on-line course, the meetings would be held on weekends which meant a big hassle for students having hectic schedules particularly those who live outside Metro Manila."

Accessibility. Similarly, the site's accessibility was due to the ease with which students use the site. The ability to get information at the time when one wants it is great comfort to many university students.

"I liked that my access to their modules and take the quizzes anytime and in any place I want, and I didn't have to attend a class I just visited the site and opened it."

"I can see my grades any time I want."

Prevalent Issues. Like any product, there are both the good and bad aspects. University students encountered numerous problems. As one student narrates, *"The words, "PROBLEM" and "CWTS", are married!"*

- **Instructor.** The CWTS instructor plays vital role in the on-line process. Many of the students encountered problems with the instructors.

- *Unavailability.* Some students cannot reach the instructor at their leisure.

  "All I knew was his name was there but he never really talks to us."

  "I couldn't find him when I needed to."

- *Response.* When the students contact the instructor, time lapsed between the questions and responses are often unfavorable.

  "(You can) e-mail him anytime, but he can only reply at some given time."

  "(I've got) a problem on how to contact the instructor because he seldom replies…"

- **Evaluation.** The evaluation tests of a course indicate how effective the lessons are. Some noted the problems in the evaluation aspect of the course.

  - *Quality*. In terms of how the tests and activities are prepared, some students found them inadequate.

    "At first, it was okay but later on, the questions were redundant."

    "Since only the computer checks our evaluation test there is no feedback."

  - *Reliability*. As the activities were tests are all on-line, some students were concerned with the reliability of the score. Prevalent cheating was observed.

    "Since the quizzes were taken on-line, students can just let their friends take the quizzes for them. It was very much practiced during my time."

- **Course Content.** Students were concerned with the lessons in the course.
    - *Cognitive Engagement.* Some find the lessons are unsatisfactory.

        "I felt like they focused more on rote memorization. I felt that we didn't need to know those things taught in the course."

        "I was a bit disappointed that we had topics like "Dignity of Man"—topics which were already taken up in Theology. I felt that we didn't need to know those things taught in the course."

    - *Length.* Others found the sheer length of the modules unsatisfactory.

        "Lengthy and very boring because of the long lectures!"

- **Layout and Design.** Some students considered the site content and data arrangement an issue.
    - *Site Layout.* Components of the website were an issue to some students.

        "I found the site somehow difficult because the design and layout were not very nice."

        "I was lost in the site. It was not easy to navigate."

    - *Module Presentation.* Lessons are presented in modules, hence, students have to read and understand. Some students found the visual presentation of the modules to be an issue.

"They should add graphics, images, sounds to the modules because lessons were purely text and so boring to read." (First Batch)

"I didn't enjoy reading the modules. They were very long and the font size is also small."

- **Time.** Although on-line courses were so designed to enable learners to learn at their own pace. In a university setting, students find time factor to be an issue.

    - *Schedule Conflict.* Sometimes, the course uses up time usually spent for regular courses.

        "My difficulty was I had no time to go on-line to work on the activities and assignments because of our academic schedules."

        "It requires a lot of time to read the modules."

    - *Other Time-related Conflicts*. Some students find accessing the site during weekends to be an issue.

        "It requires and eats up all your extra time which are meant for studying…"

        "CWTS class took my only day to relax."

- **Economic Reasons.** Some students who do not have computers at home found this to be an issue.

    "Some difficulties were going to the internet shop every now and then, which takes some sum of money."

    "Some students who live in dormitories have no computers which are expensive to rent."

- **System.** Students have a lot of issues on the system by which the course runs.

"You can access it any time, but the system is always down."

"Once, the server broke down in the middle of our preliminary examination, resulting to a retest. Another time, the site wouldn't open and we had to take the post-test on that day."

"The system is a bit premature. In short, "hinog sa pilit" (premature)."

Post-Instruction

A product that may seem to work at one point may not always work. Hence, university students were asked what they thought after finishing the course.

Course Effectiveness. When asked if they want to enroll more on-line courses from the university, basing solely on their experience in CWTS, majority of the respondents said they would not.

"It makes us lazy and unproductive. Students might not be serious about it and just take it as a joke."

"I don't think that on-line learning right now is effective."

Almost everybody agrees that they still prefer the traditional classroom setting. It has been said that the teacher is still the best teaching aid.

"I would rather have a teacher. I don't like just reading modules, I don't feel like I'm really learning anything."

"I think that it is still better to have the classroom approach."

In summation, students were asked what recommendations they had to improve the on-line course. As individuals who experienced the course firsthand, it is clear that the administrators of the system need to survey the students' responses.

"Make some further assessments for the students for them to enjoy the on-line courses."

"Probably more study on the view of the students since the modules aren't very interesting for us."

Student Recommendations. Students had their own idea of how to make future instances of on-line CWTS a more enjoyable experience. These responses are presented in Table 3.

Table 3.

University Students' Recommendations

Areas for Improvement	Significant Statements
Instructor Students observed a lack of supervision in the system.	*"What they should have is a facilitator who will explain the lesson."*
Evaluation Students see how they scored but are not aware of the mistakes they committed.	*"Show the correct answers in the exams after the deadline."*
Course Content Students do not find the lessons to be intellectually stimulating.	*"Delivery of lessons should center on the HOTS (Higher Order Thinking Skills). Students should not feel that much that they're working—they should also enjoy in the process."*
Layout and Design Students find the on-line environment not conducive to learning.	*"They should add graphics, images, sounds to the modules because the lessons were purely text and it so boring to read.""They should develop their Flash presentation and add more graphics and sounds so they could get more attention and interest from the students."*
Time Students find the time given to them to be unreasonable.	*"They should not give any time frame in opening the site.""They should give more time for the activities."*
Economic Reasons A room for the program will alleviate the need to rent computers outside.	*"They should provide a room for use of the program."*
System The system in itself needs to be fixed for easy use.	*"Problems in the system should be kept at a minimum… check the system constantly for errors.""Upgrading of the system and maybe increase in servers, some anti-hacking programs."*

Discussion

This study found several response types for each phase of the on-line CWTS course. The "Pre-instruction" phase addressed two conflicting preconceived notions – constructive ideas, and degenerative ideas. In the "During Instruction" phase, there has been a noticeably larger occurrence of disadvantages to the on-line course, which in effect, outweighed the favorable qualities. In the "Post Instruction" phase, the study highlighted some respondent recommendations for the overall improvement of the on-line CWTS course.

For the "Pre-instruction Phase", students who held constructive ideas thought of on-line learning as easy, interesting, exciting and convenient. This type of thinking could be attributed to several factors in a similar study (Selwyn, Dawes, & Mercer, 2001). Respondents believe that on-line learning is a new and futuristic form of education and consider it the next generation, and would serve as a solution to teaching problems. Moreover, students' actual skills and interest level in socializing on-line also impacts their perception (Robertson, Grant, & Jackson, 2005; Peters, 2001). It can be inferred that university students who are well versed in the use of computers tend to have positive preconceived notions. However, students who are not fluent in the use of computers are not willing to jeopardize their comfort zones in the traditional classroom setting (Robertson, Grant & Jackson, 2005; Muirhead, 2000; Hughes & Hewson, 1998).

The bulk of this study is in the "During Instruction" phase. Initial investigation reveals that university students enjoy working in groups. This supports the idea that students need to collaborate in the learning process (Muirhead, 2000; Brown, 1997). It is interesting to note that those who enjoyed group activities are those who knew their group mates personally. Prior to CWTS instruction, respondents were already classmates in their general courses. Thus, they were able to satisfy Burge's four-point expectations of on-line peers (as cited by Muirhead, 2000): Participation, Response, Affective Feedback, and Focused Messaging. Since on-line courses are impersonal in nature, students tend to enjoy the social interaction of On-line Forums. It provides a check-and-balance among students clarifying issues that may have been previously addressed.

Also in this phase, students assessed the effectiveness of the new learning environment and addressed their immediate concerns.

First is the issue of the lack of supervision in the on-line system. In a similar study by Muirhead (2000), Dario Nardi notes the needs of on-line students. Since majority of the problems deals on the unavailability of the instructor, respondents mentioned asking their fellow students. The need for immediate feedback should not be substituted by peer reassurance. Nardi adds that feedback should come only from an expert such as a professor.

The kind of instruction also posed some questions. It cannot be helped that the on-line system will be compared to the traditional classroom setting. It is clear that even after experiencing on-line learning, many students still prefer the classroom. Filipinos are relational geniuses in nature (Viernes & de Guzman, 2005) and this explains why students prefer the traditional method of instruction over its on-line counterpart. The Filipino psyche prefers closeness and familiarity which are noticeably lacking in the on-line nature of delivery.

Second is the issue of evaluation. The primary concern in this aspect is that after each test, the student sees his score only. Ideally, the student should be able to review the errors he committed, so he will no longer commit them in the future. Since the system does not provide this information even after the time set for the quiz, students are prone to commit the same uncorrected mistakes.

Third, students are concerned with the quality of material being taught. Respondents wished the lectures were not as long as they were, while others still found the cognitive engagement to be lacking. Since most of the lessons do not need a higher level of understanding, simple rote memorization is all that is needed to pass the course. Application of Higher Order Thinking Skills - Oriented (HOTS) activities would dramatically benefit the overall cognitive engagement.

As to layout and design, most students did not find the on-line environment to be conducive to learning. The design aspect seemed unfit for the already diverse levels of computer competency. The interface design

must be easily navigated allowing students to manipulate elements with ease, have a sense of human interaction through remediation, allow students to discover outcomes rather than being too didactic, and have responsiveness to the learners via a simulation to the real world (Andrewartha & Wilmot, 2001; Brown, 1997).

While most available literature have asserted the value of on-line courses in terms of time saved, the locus of this study has to be considered. In a competitive university setting where CWTS enrollees do not take all their classes on-line, juggling between these two modes of instruction been proven to be time constraining. If in the beginning, the students believed CWTS would take up less time, problems in the system have caused them to spend more time than they were willing to give up.

The same goes for the economic issues raised. In distance education, on-line learning is less expensive because students save travel time and costs, working when and where they wanted (Robertson, Grant, & Jackson, 2005; Valenta et al., 2001). Considering the same locus where access to classrooms has never been an issue, additional cost of internet service as well as renting computer units proves that the economic concept of on-line learning does not apply to all settings.

Finally, the system posed the most problems. Ideally, a system which has errors kept at a minimum would not hinder learning. However, many respondents agree that the system's constant failure to meet optimum capacity has prevented them from accessing information and errors they would not encounter if the course was not delivered on-line. There have been no cases of teachers or classrooms bugging down.

Conclusions

This paper has described qualitatively the virtual experiences of university students in Civic Welfare Training Service (CWTS). First, it explored both the constructive and degenerative pre-conceived notions of students. Some students believed it was easy, exciting, and convenient while others were concerned about course effectiveness and decreased

social interaction. This belief is, more often than not, influenced by their previous experience in computer use.

Moreover, the paper tracked the advantages and disadvantages of the actual course. Students found the course to be accessible and convenient but also very problematic. Issues with the instructor, evaluation, course content, design, and system, among others, lead to the conclusion that although the concept of an on-line course seems inviting, problems with the system itself have discouraged majority of the students from taking more on-line courses. The nature of the Filipinos as relational geniuses (Viernes & de Guzman, 2005) accounts for their preference for a kind of instruction, characterized by face-to-face encounter with the teacher, over a kind of environment mediated by technology.

Lastly, the paper offered some recommendations for the improvement of the course's future instances. Being end-users of the on-line course, these statements that aim to improve each of the problem areas of the course are solutions that should be investigated further.

Interestingly, this qualitative inquiry has disproved previous positive previous concepts about time and money in on-line courses once it has been translated into the setting of a comprehensive university where students' connectivity to the internet, particularly when they are outside the classroom, is an issue.

Although the sampled group is limited, results of the study invite educational researchers to probe into factors identified in this study, involving a more aggregate sample group and combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to research.

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