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Decoding Students' Digital Body Language through the Lens of Teachers: A Phenomenological Sketch

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Abstract

This research focused on digital body language (DBL) in the context of Online Distance Learning (ODL). In ODL, students and teachers rely on digital platforms and technologies for learning, replacing traditional in-person interaction. DBL, a systematic technique to interpret digital signs similar to physical signs, has emerged to understand body language during digital communication. This study employed Husserlian phenomenology to explore teachers' experiences with students' digital body language during virtual consultations. Eight ODL teachers participated in web-based interviews, and the data were transcribed and analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) method. The analysis revealed three themes: (1) Building Connections, (2) Threats to Connections, and (3) Varieties in Connections. These findings demonstrate that teachers perceived students' digital body language as positive and negative experiences. The insights gained from this study provide valuable input for teachers and administrators to enhance communication among students and teachers in the virtual learning environment, extending beyond the challenges of the new normal.

Keywords: Digital Body Language, Online Distance Learning, Phenomenology, Online Communication, Lived Experiences, Virtual Consultations.

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INTRODUCTION

In Online Distance Learning (ODL), students and teachers connect through various platforms and technologies to facilitate and reinforce learning without physical interaction due to the restrictions of in-person classes. This change in learning modality also shifted the mode of communication for school-related concerns - from primarily traditional to digital. Hence, "digital body language" (DBL) emerged to characterize the body language displayed during digital communication. DBL is a systematic technique to comprehend digital signs like humans perceive physical signs (Dhawan, 2021). As a result, DBL became the new non-verbal cue that teachers and students must be aware of in this virtual mode of communication.

Digital communication is simple, but needs help understanding (Rahmawati & Sujono, 2021). In an online classroom, digital body language replaces conventional body language. For example, students bowed their heads, and wandering eyes became, turning off the camera and muting the microphone when not knowing the answer to the teacher's question. Students' consultation appointment with teachers for class-related inquiry is replaced with email correspondence. In other examples, students use traditional body language, such as stroking their chins or pausing for a few seconds to indicate that they are considering what has just been spoken. However, this time, they can "see," "ignore," or "react" to a message. Thus, it is unsurprising that messaging interfaces are ubiquitous and confusing (Montaque *et al.*, 2020). These are often observed when sentences, words, and even punctuation can be misunderstood (Dhawan, 2021). This situation signifies that teachers must make sense of these dynamics of confusion and cluttered communications while working with many students regularly.

In the Philippines, higher education institutions (HEI) use various means to connect with their students to continue their education. The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) proposed that HEIs use Short Message Service (SMS), electronic mail (email), online chat, instant messaging, and other means as appropriate and available (CHED *et al.*, No. 4, 2020). These enabled teachers and students to get in touch even without physical contact. This existing condition of digital communication is also true in the institution where this study was conducted, as it implements online distance

learning. However, despite the efforts of teachers and students to maintain constant communication, the difference in experience between digital and traditional communication exists. These experiences must be considered as this may be a source of opportunity or concern in online distance learning.

Regarding digital body language, a few articles were written, mainly in the business industry. One of the papers examined the attribution of the technical delay to the conversation could be personalized and behavior-related characteristics, describing a sample of digital body language and how people in the corporate interpret it (Schoenberg *et al.*, 2014). In addition, an article was published on how communicating solely in emojis has taught about language in the digital age. It attempts to explain how a person interprets this emoji as a form of digital body language (Lee, 2016). However, the article is written for a general audience and does not place it from an academic perspective. To date, no current studies are exploring and explaining digital body language in the context of education; most of it is a general perspective. The study was conducted on the premise of the existing gaps in knowledge.

With that, it is necessary to reveal the teachers' experiences since they are the ones who give their interpretations of their students' digital body language. Thus, a descriptive phenomenological study was conducted to reveal the essence and give meaning to the teachers' lived experiences with their students' digital body language. This research can shed light on the current state of digital communication. Furthermore, the result will provide the department with data to support revising the communication policies and conducting students' awareness webinars to ensure a harmonious and healthy relationship in the digital space.

PHILOSOPHICAL STANCE

This study employs an atheoretical approach, focusing purely on descriptive qualitative data without relying on a pre-existing theory (Taylor *et al.*, 2016). However, the philosophical stance of this research is rooted in the paradigm of social constructivism, emphasizing the interdependence of social and individual processes in the co-construction of knowledge (Palincsar, 1998).

The ontological perspective adopted posits that there is no "universal truth," but rather, the reality is subjective and varies based on individual interpretations (Leavy, 2014; Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Here, teachers' thoughts and interpretations of their students' digital body language shape the reality being sought to understand. From an epistemological perspective, a constructionist approach is followed, valuing the diversity of interpretations of the same situation and recognizing that there is no single accurate or valid interpretation (Levy, 2006; Ahmed, 2008). The axiological stance of this research acknowledges that it is value-laden, influenced by the social positions and biases of the researchers and participants, thus shaping the interpretation of digital body language in a virtual environment (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Lastly, the rhetorical stance ensures that the language used in the research is formal and objective. A narrative style presents teachers' experiences without obscuring any information (Dawson, 1998).

Domain of Inquiry

What are the lived experiences of teachers on their students' digital body language during online communications?

MATERIALS AND METHOD

Design

This research is a descriptive phenomenological design that describes the in-service teachers' lived experiences of students' digital body language as they communicated during their online classes. Phenomenology is derived from philosophy and serves as a framework for the research method. It emphasizes that only those who have experienced phenomena can communicate them to the rest of the world (Rapport, 2004). Specifically, Husserlian Phenomenology will be used in the study. Edmund Husserl argued that no assumptions, philosophical or scientific theory, deductive logic techniques, or other empirical science or psychological speculations should be utilized to guide the inquiry of phenomenology (Neubauer *et al.*, 2019). Instead, the emphasis should be on what is directly given to an individual's intuition. The goal of the researchers in Husserl's transcendental phenomenology is to achieve transcendental subjectivity—a state in which "the impact of the researcher on the inquiry is constantly assessed; biases and preconceptions are neutralized not to influence the object of study" (Lopez & Willis, 2004). The researchers took necessary steps to suspend their attitudes, views, and assumptions to focus on the participant's experience of the phenomenon and uncover its essence (Neubauer *et al.*, 2019).

Environment

The study was conducted in a Teacher Education Institution (TEI) that has implemented a fully online instructional delivery mode since the pandemic's start. With a learning management system, the college used a combination of synchronous and asynchronous learning delivery of class material, activities, interactions, and assessments.

Participants and Sampling Technique

The type of sampling used in the study is purposive sampling because it selects individuals who will know the phenomena concerned (Clifford *et al.*, 1997). Participants of this study are selected with the following inclusion criteria. a.) instructors of the College of Teacher Education b.) instructors that have experienced online classes since the start of the

pandemic. c.) voluntarily consented to participate in the study and willing to articulate their experiences on the digital body language of their studies. It is suggested by (Khan *et al*., 2015) that the sample size should be small in phenomenological research so that each experience can be thoroughly examined. Different sources recommend different sample sizes for phenomenological research, but a sample of 6 to 20 people is sufficient (Ellis, 2016). Thus, a sample of eight college teachers was used as the data saturation was achieved on this number.

Research Instrument

In this phenomenological study, the researchers are considered the primary instrument since they are the ones who initiate the collection of the data. According to Pezalla *et al*., (2012), the researcher is responsible for making specific decisions as to how the gathering of data progresses in an unstructured interview. Thus, as the main instrument, the researchers used a semi-structured interview guide to gather the data.

Data-Gathering Procedure

Data gathering commenced after the ethics approval. Then, transmittal and consent letters were sent to the identified participants based on the inclusion criteria. With the nature of the study and the restrictions of the pandemic, a web-based interview scheme was used by the researchers. Then, collecting data through semi-structured interviews proceeded. The open-ended questions ask participants about their experiences with and interpretations of their student's digital body language. After completing the interview, participants received a copy of their responses. Following the interview, the data gathered was transcribed, organized, coded, and analyzed.

Data Analysis Procedure

This study utilized a data analysis method proposed by Colaizzi (1978). Colaizzi had a distinct seven-step process that provided a rigorous analysis, with each step closely relating to the data. The researchers familiarized themselves with the gathered data by thoroughly reading the participants' accounts multiple times. They identified significant statements directly related to the investigated phenomenon from the data. After thoroughly examining the essential assertions, the researchers formulated meanings that emerged, striving to remain as close to the phenomenon as possible by reflexively bracketing their assumptions. The discovered meanings were then clustered into themes found across all accounts. Next, the researchers crafted a comprehensive description of the phenomena, incorporating all generated themes. They condensed this lengthy explanation into a concise, dense statement, retaining only the components believed to be critical to the structure of the phenomenon. Finally, the researcher sought verification of the fundamental structure by providing the participants with the statement and evaluating if it accurately represented their experiences.

Trustworthiness

Rigor is necessary for enhancing the consistency and quality of qualitative research, serving as the framework for demonstrating the credibility and integrity of the research process. To ensure data accuracy and traceability, the researchers re-read the transcripts, striving to make sense of the participants' experiences. As the main instrument of the research, the researchers identify significant statements and formulate meanings, which are meticulously documented in the codebook.

In addition, the four criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) – credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability – are observed in the conduct of this study. The initial results are shared with the participants for member checking. Moreover, experts are consulted to review both the process and data analysis. A thick description of the participants' experiences is provided as reflected in the discussions. Finally, an audit trail is maintained to ensure that the findings faithfully represent the essence of teachers' experiences.

Ethical Considerations

Before data collection, the study was submitted to the Ethics Review Committee for approval. The researchers obtained informed consent from all participants to ensure ethical participation. All personal information and responses were handled with utmost confidentiality to protect the subjects' identities. Electronic data, including consent forms and participant responses, were managed exclusively by the researchers, ensuring safe and respectful treatment of participant information. The risk level associated with the study was determined to be low.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Following Colaizzi's seven-step method of data analysis, the meanings attributed to the narratives are presented thematically. As narrative inquirers, the researchers noticed how narratives are incorporated into social and educational environments. This was discovered when the many interactions and thoughts on and of their experiences were organized in the interview transcripts. The three themes— Building Connections, Threats to Connections, and Varieties in Connections— are exhaustively covered in the following section. The basic framework of the participant's reports, which characterize their perceptions and experiences of teachers on the digital body language of their students, were reduced as follows.

Theme 1. Building Connections

The teachers considered some of the digital body languages of their students during their online communications as a way to build connections. Building connections is one of the clusters of themes identified by the researchers. This theme comprises the following sub-themes: building rapport, rephrasing for understanding,

flexible communication, and teachers' expectations of messages.

Connection in distance learning is essential. Students and teachers should build a community no matter the distance. Some students tend to send messages that are not school-related concerns. According to Participant 3, "*I just want to be your friend, Ms…"* and Participant 4 added, *"Sir, you look stressed already in our synchronous session; I hope you rest too."* Students sending messages unrelated to classes is a strategy to build rapport with the teacher. In addition, some students also adjust their tone in messaging once they meet their teachers in the synchronous session. Participant 3 said, *"After they saw me in the online class, how they message me changed immediately…"*. Teachers found that some of the digital body languages of the students were made to build connections.

Clarity of message is one of the keys to ensuring connections. Some teachers shared that they must rephrase their students' statements to clarify their meaning. Participant 3 shared that, *"The use of cohesive devices like "and" instead of "but"… I tried to rephrase their statements as I responded to their messages…."* Likewise, Participant 7 shared, *"Sometimes I cannot understand their message, so I let them say it in Bisaya (vernacular)..."* Furthermore, to build and strengthen connections with students, teachers accept messages outside the consultation hours, as revealed by Participant 3, *"We have consultation time, but still, some students were entertained on their school concerns outside the consultation hours."* The adjustments made by teachers on the students' digital body language are geared towards building connections. They have clearly understood that engagement is an integral part of learning.

From a social constructivist standpoint, it is unsurprising that teachers in this study interpreted some of the students' digital body language as a means of connection-building during online communications. This idea is embodied in the identified theme cluster of "building connections," which includes building rapport, rephrasing for understanding, flexibility in communication, and teachers' expectations of messages.

Within the distance learning framework, creating a sense of community between students and teachers is pivotal, regardless of the physical separation. As illustrated by Participants 3 and 4, some students use non-academic-related messages to establish rapport. This aligns with the social constructivist belief in the importance of social interaction for learning and the co-construction of knowledge.

Additionally, clarity of message plays a crucial role in fostering these connections. Teachers, like Participants 3 and 7, often need to rephrase students' messages for clarity or allow communication in the vernacular language. This flexibility in communication, even beyond designated consultation hours, reflects the commitment to understanding the subjective experiences of their students, a critical constructivist principle.

The current global situation, intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, has amplified the importance of maintaining connections in an online learning environment (Kumar *et al*., 2021). As Bernard *et al*., (2009) indicated, student interaction must be a priority, regardless of the mode of instruction. Whether through synchronous or asynchronous interaction (Soo & Bonk, 1998), teachers in this study have shown their dedication to fostering connection and engagement, embracing students' digital body language to enhance the learning experience. This echoes the social constructivist paradigm by emphasizing the role of teachers in facilitating the co-construction of knowledge and the subjective interpretation of experiences in the digital environment.

Theme 2. Threats to Connections

As teachers establish connections with their students using online platforms, they encounter potential threats in virtual communications. This cluster of themes includes the negative experiences and potential threats teachers encounter. Teachers consider the considerable bulk of messages received from students as a cause of stress. Participant 4 narrated: *"A large number of messages is stressful…We do not see the messages sometimes."* Participant 6 also echoed this sentiment: *"We are bombarded with many messages."*

In addition to teachers feeling stressed when receiving numerous messages, they are annoyed when their students ask them questions repeatedly, even though instructions were given during synchronous sessions. Participant 4 revealed: *"When I give instructions in synchronous sessions, I make sure that I will repeat it many times, but there are students who send private messages after the class, which annoys me sometimes."* Similarly, participant 7 noted a similar experience when he said, *"Students also ask questions which were already answered during the synchronous sessions, and I think they are not being attentive in class."*

Aside from getting annoyed when students repeatedly ask questions, they also regard some approaches to responding to messages as signs of disrespect. Participant 5 explained this experience during his conversation when a student asked him a question in one of his classes. He disclosed: "*One time, one of my students asked whether we would meet in our synchronous session on our schedule, and I could not respond immediately. Then, one of his classmates responded yes. Supposedly, he should not respond to the question since he is not being addressed. It seems that he is being disrespectful. I messaged the student personally that he should not respond to questions not addressed to him."*

Similarly, participant 4 also encountered one of her students who tried to send messages and ask too personal questions. She said: *"Miss, I just want to get close to you" ... I find it the other way."* Participant 6 also revealed an experience when his student sent him a message in their learning management system without greeting him first. He shared: *"Others do not greet when sending messages. During the first day of the class, one student messaged the LMS and said, "Is there no Group Chat in the class, sir?"*

In establishing connections with their students through online platforms, teachers have been confronted with potential threats and negative experiences, an aspect of the research findings underpinning the constructivist and atheoretical stance. The onslaught of a large volume of student messages is seen as a source of stress, as Participant 4 and Participant 6 shared.

Teachers experience stress from the sheer number of messages and repeated queries, even when instructions have already been delivered during synchronous sessions. This experience, shared by Participants 4 and 7, could be understood as students seeking individualized attention and confirmation, aligning with the epistemological stance of social constructionism, where each student has their understanding and interpretation of classroom communication.

Further complicating the online communication dynamic, teachers perceive certain response behaviors as signs of disrespect, as Participants 5 and 4 expressed. This includes students responding to messages not addressed to them and initiating overly personal conversations. Participant 6 also highlighted the absence of common communication courtesies, such as greeting, as a point of concern.

These experiences of technostress in online teaching during the pandemic are potential threats to the teacher-student relationship (Chou & Chou, 2021), emphasizing the importance of maintaining strong and healthy connections (Global *et al*., 2019). Such adverse experiences underline the need for effective classroom management practices online to preempt potential misbehavior and ensure respectful communication (Wolff *et al*., 2020). As interpreted by the teachers in this study, the students' digital body language shapes the virtual classroom's socio-emotional climate, reinforcing the interconnectedness of social and individual processes in the co-construction of knowledge, a core tenet of social constructivism.

Theme 3: Varieties in Connections

In an online classroom, digital body language replaces conventional body language. Teachers experienced variety in communication while attempting to make connections. This cluster of themes includes emojis and no response conveying varying meanings. In traditional communication, facial reactions give emotions to the conversation. However, in today's communication, emotions become difficult to decipher. Hence, emojis tried to help create emotions in plain text, but these electronic signs that mimic human emotions also vary in meaning. Participant 6 revealed that *"I preferred "heart" emoji over "like" emoji. I asked them to reply through "heart."* It is also supported by Participant 8, *"Most of my students used "heart" emoticons which means that they are okay with it and they have understood the instructions…"*. The teachers prefer to respond in group conversations with "heart" rather than "like." Teachers worry when they receive a "like" response which can mean otherwise.

Consequently, one of the usual experiences of teachers in online communications with students is waiting for a response. Not receiving a response means different from different participants. Participant 6 shared what she felt when waiting for her students' response. She said: *"If they do not respond if I ask a question, I find it disrespectful."* In other instances, she also describes non-response as an act of playing safe among students. She disclosed: *"Maybe they are playing safe; they are also waiting for others to respond to the question."*

On the other hand, not receiving a response invites worries from other teachers. Participant 5 said, *"During the start of classes, they do not respond. It worried me a bit, so I started to inform them that they should press the heart reaction if I have a message for them."* In addition, it is not a big deal for teachers if students do not respond if the message merely gives information. Participant 7 added: *"It is okay if the message I sent does not have an immediate response like giving announcements."*

In the online classroom's landscape, conventional body language is redefined by digital body language, aligning with the principles of the social constructivist paradigm that knowledge is co-constructed through social interactions and interpretations. Teachers navigate this varied communication landscape as they seek to foster connections with students.

Emojis serve as a poignant example of this digital interaction. These graphic signs, aimed at embodying human emotions in an otherwise unemotional text, can carry varying meanings for different individuals. Participants 6 and 8's preference for the "heart" emoji over the "like" emoji illustrates this variability and how the same symbol can be interpreted differently in different contexts, reflecting social constructivism's emphasis on the subjective nature of knowledge.

Moreover, the experience of receiving no response from students represents another complex

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aspect of online communication. Teachers interpret the absence of a response differently, highlighting the diversity and subjectivity in how communication, or lack thereof, is understood. For Participant 6, it is seen as a sign of disrespect or a safe-playing strategy; for Participant 5, it is cause for worry; and for Participant 7, it is acceptable in specific contexts. This multiplicity of meanings aligns with the social constructivist stance, highlighting how each constructs their understanding of a situation based on their experiences and contexts.

According to Dhawan (2021), digital body language often invites ambiguous interpretations, mirroring the social constructivist perspective that understanding is constructed through social interaction. Teachers strive to make sense of the nuances in students' texts, regardless of the digital symbols used, highlighting their active role in interpreting and creating knowledge. As such, students must communicate carefully and clearly, acknowledging the potential for diverse interpretations. Clear, unambiguous messages can help ensure robust connections in digital communication, reaffirming the social constructivist view of co-constructed, interpretive knowledge.

Implications

In examining teachers' lived experiences with students' digital body language during online instruction, this study underscores the multifaceted challenges and adaptabilities inherent in virtual education. Teachers, as critical interpreters, navigate an array of digital cues, which, while often ambiguous, are set against their commitment to fostering virtual connections. Notably, the interpretation of such cues, like a 'like' emoji or silence, varies among educators, underscoring the social constructivist notion of subjective meaning-making. Irrespective of varied interpretations, the importance of mutual respect and trust in communication emerges distinctly. Institutions are thus urged to reform communication policies, emphasizing training programs that foster online engagement and digital etiquette. While the study sheds light on teachers' experiences, it recognizes the unexplored realm of students' perspectives and the potential bias of teachers' preconceived notions. Future research is advocated to provide a comprehensive understanding of digital interactions in online classrooms, including students' perceptions and the influence of teachers' prior knowledge on their digital engagements.

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