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Abstract

Academic programs set learning competencies as essential standards to ensure that students acquire the necessary knowledge, skills, and values. The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) prescribed the competencies for the AB-Philosophy Program through CMO No. 26 s. 2017, which includes the ability to demonstrate critical and logical thinking, construct cogent arguments, engage analytically and interpretively with philosophical texts, develop research and academic writing skills, apply philosophical theories to concrete situations, and critically evaluate the essence of philosophical learning in relation to the True, the Good, and the Just. However, the teaching-learning process was disrupted during the COVID-19 pandemic, raising concerns on students' capacity to achieve the program-mandated learning competencies. Given the limited research, there is a need to understand how philosophy students achieve learning competencies during the pandemic. This study used a phenomenological lens to characterize the lived experiences of Bicol University philosophy students (n=13), aged 21-23, on distance learning during the pandemic. Based on their narratives, this study characterized the “I—Learning” experience, which is composed of a triadic theme: a) I—Learning Spaces, b) I—Thou Learning, and c) I—I (self) Learning. This characterization highlights the interdependent and relational act of meaning-making of the “I” (philosophy student) to their learning spaces, others (educators, family, peers), and the “self” that explains how they confront their lived realities to thrive during the pandemic. The findings of this study also provide practical insights for developing a learning system that is both responsive and adaptive during periods of disruption, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: *Learning Competencies, AB-Philosophy, COVID-19 Pandemic, Distance Learning*

INTRODUCTION

Martin Buber argued, “*All real living is meeting.*”¹ Education, then, is not merely the acquisition of knowledge but a relational act. It is a dialogue between self, others, and the world. In philosophy, this relationality is important since learning emerges not in isolation but in encounter. Similarly, John Dewey emphasized that education is fundamentally social and experiential. He argued that the meaning of learning is shaped in interaction with others and the environment.² Yet, the continuity and quality of the learning process are significantly affected when these encounters are disrupted and the dialogical space for learning undergoes a sudden shift.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted learning. With this, distance learning³ was forcedly adopted by academic institutions to prevent a learning crisis from becoming a generational catastrophe.⁴ According to the United Nations, the pandemic disruption to education systems globally affects nearly 1.6 billion learners.⁵ While distance learning offered a necessary alternative amid lockdowns and social distancing, it also fundamentally redefined how learning occurs. Several learning challenges were experienced because of this sudden shift including poor learning environment,⁶ limited access to digital resources,⁷

1 Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937), 11.

2 see John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916).

3 Distance learning, defined by Britannica as “form of education in which the main elements include physical separation of teachers and students during instruction and the use of various technologies to facilitate student-teacher and student-student communication” (Simonson and Berg, 2025).

4 Rabab Ali Abumalloh et al., “The Impact of Coronavirus Pandemic (COVID-19) on Education: The Role of Virtual and Remote Laboratories in Education,” *Technology in Society* 67 (November 2021): 101728, 1-9; United Nations (UN), *Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and Beyond* (New York: United Nations, August 2020), 2.

5 UN, *Policy Brief*, 2.

6 Jessie S. Barrot, Ian J. Llenares, and Leo M. Del Rosario, “Students’ Online Learning Challenges during the Pandemic and How They Cope with Them: The Case of the Philippines,” *Education and Information Technologies* 26 (2021): 7321–7338.

7 Sadia Jamil and Glenn W. Muschert, “The COVID-19 Pandemic and E-Learning: The Digital Divide and Educational Crises in Pakistan’s Universities,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 67, no. 10 (2023): 1161-1179.

students' mental health,⁸ and, lack of social and collaborative learning.⁹ These affect students' ability to achieve learning competencies¹⁰ and contribute to learning loss. With this, there is an urgent need to rethink how education can remain accessible, meaningful, and competency-driven even in times of public health crises.

Education sectors across the globe, particularly in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), put in place policies and recommendations to maintain learning continuity and in order to address these challenges.¹¹ This action is essential for institutions to achieve the learning competencies set by the academic institutions. In the Philippines, there were memoranda issued by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) to reduce health risk and promote educational continuity and access, such as CMO no. 4 s. 2020. This memorandum focuses on flexible learning modalities in which students learn according to their individual needs. HEIs were ordered to formulate learning continuity plans, enhance curricula, and give sufficient support and training to teachers and students. In accordance with such directives at the national level, Bicol University (BU),¹² came out with several memoranda outlining the flexible learning modalities to mitigate the adverse impacts of distance learning on students' performance.¹³ In spite of such proactive efforts, difficulties in attaining the learning competencies intended under CHED and the university continue to exist.

8 Barrot, Llenares, and Del Rosario, "Students' Online Learning Challenges during the Pandemic."

9 Tea Pavin Ivanec, "The Lack of Academic Social Interactions and Students' Learning Difficulties during COVID-19 Faculty Lockdowns in Croatia: The Mediating Role of the Perceived Sense of Life Disruption Caused by the Pandemic and the Adjustment to Online Studying," *Social Sciences* 11, no. 2 (2022): 42.

10 Learning competencies are essential benchmarks set by academic programs to ensure that students acquire the necessary knowledge, skills, and values. It also refers to a combination of cognitive, motivational, moral, and social skills that individuals or groups develop to successfully handle various tasks, challenges, and goals. It encompasses more than just basic skills—it involves complex action systems that integrate understanding and effective application across different situations (see Weinert, 2001).

11 see UN, *Policy Brief*.

12 Bicol University (BU) is one of the state universities in the Bicol Region of the Philippines, established on June 21, 1969, through Republic Act No. 5521.

13 see Bicol University, *Administrative Orders on Flexible Learning*, A.O. Nos. 121, 168, 196, and 326, series of 2020 (Legazpi City: Bicol University, 2020)

One of the BU academic programs impacted by the sudden shift to distance learning is the Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy program. Based on CHED's Memorandum Order No. 26, series of 2017, the AB Philosophy program provides detailed competencies in learning that students are supposed to gain. These include the ability to demonstrate critical and logical thinking, construct cogent arguments, engage analytically and interpretively with philosophical texts, develop research and academic writing skills, apply philosophical theories to concrete situations, and critically evaluate the essence of philosophical learning in relation to the True, the Good, and the Just. But the shift to distance learning presented pedagogical challenges. Philosophy, as a discipline, is fundamentally dialogical and dialectical, qualities that are difficult to replicate in virtual environments, especially when everyone was unprepared for the transition. The limitations of distance learning, like the absence of in-person interaction, could hinder students' opportunities to effectively articulate, refine and have an in-depth discussion of their philosophical ideas. These circumstances raise serious questions about whether the academic program's learning competencies were sufficiently met during this period of disruption.

In light of this, it is crucial to inquire: *"How do Philosophy students characterize their achieved learning competencies during the pandemic?"* This inquiry aims to understand how BU philosophy students adapted to the new learning delivery modes and how these encounters affected the acquisition of program-mandated competencies. The study examines how students adapted their approach to learning and created meaning in the face of the pandemic's disruptions. This gives insight into how students continued to pursue philosophical inquiry. The study's findings provide important new information about how well distance learning upholds academic standards. Finally, the study's conclusions offer useful guidance for creating a learning system that is both responsive and adaptable in times of disruption.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study employs Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to examine the philosophy students' learning experiences during the pandemic. IPA seeks to understand how individuals make sense of their lived experiences, viewing them as experiential agents whose thoughts, feelings, and memories provide access to their inner life-worlds.¹⁴ For Martin Heidegger, lived experience is not a detached phenomenon but always situated in

14 see Edward John Noon, "Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis: An Appropriate Methodology for Educational Research?" *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice* 6, no. 1 (2018): 75-83.

the ontological structure of *being-in-the-world*.¹⁵ Grounded in Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology, IPA goes beyond mere description of lived experiences to engage in an inquiry that seeks the "meaning of being" within everyday life-world encounters.¹⁶ In this sense, phenomenology is not limited to describing what appears, but is oriented toward disclosing meaning through interpretation. Considering this, the researcher is tasked not only with presenting participants' accounts but also with offering an interpretive analysis of what it means for them to have such experiences.¹⁷ Thus, the focus is not only on what philosophy students experienced during the pandemic but also on how they made sense of these experiences in relation to their pursuit of programmatic learning competencies.

In addition, the study drew upon Buber's notion of the *I-Thou* relation as a guiding philosophical framework for thematization. According to Buber, human existence is developed through relational types of encounters: the *I-It* and *I-Thou*.¹⁸ The relationship *I-It* is marked by a mode of encounter that considers the other as an object. In contrast, in *I-Thou* the other is met as a subject, which is characterized by a deep sense of connection and the mutual acknowledgment of the other's inherent value and dignity. This differentiation allowed the conceptual framework for recognizing the relational modes of learning in students' shared narratives.

In this study, thirteen philosophy students, aged 21-23, from the College of Social Sciences and Philosophy at BU were purposively selected based on the following inclusion criteria: 1) they are at least 18 years old on January 2021, 2) should be a regular philosophy student, 3) has access to gadgets and internet connectivity during COVID-19, and 4) experienced a fully online learning modality. On one hand, irregular, shifter, and returnee philosophy students of the department were excluded from the criteria. Data gathering phase commenced when the approval and notice to proceed from the university was obtained, and when informed consent from the participants was secured. Participants were also asked for their permission to record the interviews for transcription purposes. Transcription and initial coding were carried out immediately after each interview to ensure that relevant data were captured. Transcriptions were then organized into recurring patterns, which were subsequently developed into themes. From the audio-recorded and written one-on-one interviews with

15 see Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996)

16 Noon, "Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis."

17 Noon, "Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis."

18 see Buber, *I and Thou*.

philosophy students, transcriptions were produced. After these transcriptions were analyzed to identify the themes. Finally, correspondence is the mode of validation procedure used.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study typifies the learning experiences of Philosophy Students during the Pandemic. Using the phenomenological lens to uncover how philosophy students give meaning in achieving learning competencies, the “*I—learning*” experience framework surfaced with a triadic theme that characterizes this phenomenon: a) *I—Learning Spaces*; b) *I—Thou Learning*; and, *I—I (self) Learning*.

In the triadic thematization, the use of hyphen (“—”) is not merely a grammatical connector, but philosophically reflects a symbol of relational being, drawing on Heidegger’s idea that the hyphen expresses an ontological link of co-belonging between entities.¹⁹ In this study, the hyphen represents the essential and interconnected relationship of the “*I*” (philosophy student) to their learning spaces, others (Educators, Family, Peers), and the “self” that holistically describes the philosophy students’ lived realities in achieving the learning competencies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The table below shows and highlights the key aspects of the *I—Learning Experience* and describes how philosophy students were able to achieve the learning competencies in a pandemic.

TABLE 1. “*I—Learning*” Experience in Achieving Learning Competencies of Bicol University Philosophy Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Themes	Dimensions (subthemes)	Collective Description
<i>I—Learning Spaces:</i> Achieving Learning Competencies through Adaptation to New Spaces	<i>I—Digital Space</i>	Characterizes the indispensable connection between Philosophy Students’ learning experience and their learning spaces (Digital and Home Spaces) during the COVID-19 pandemic in achieving the learning competencies required by the Philosophy Program.
	<i>I—Home Space</i>	

¹⁹ see Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

Themes	Dimensions (subthemes)	Collective Description
<i>I—Thou Learning:</i> Achieving Learning Competencies with Others	<i>I—Thou</i> (Educators' Presence)	Characterizes the relational aspect of Philosophy Students' learning with "others" in attaining the learning competencies. This pertains to the philosophy students' relation toward their educators, family, and peers as an essential social support system in achieving the learning competencies.
	<i>I—Thou</i> (Family Presence)	
	<i>I—Thou</i> (Peer-Learning Presence)	
<i>I—I (self) Learning:</i> Achieving Learning Competencies with Oneself	<i>I—Mind Learning:</i> Nexus to Philosophical Knowledge	Characterizes the value of internal mechanisms and self-directed efforts that philosophy students employ to achieve the learning competencies. It reflects the holistic approach, where the self (philosophy students) actively engages their knowledge (mind), personal (soul), and physical (body) capacities in the learning process.
	<i>I—Soul Learning:</i> Nexus to Personal Attributes	
	<i>I—Body Learning:</i> Nexus to Physical Well-being	

A. *I—Learning Spaces:* Achieving Learning Competencies through Adaptation to New Spaces

Learning spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic were restructured, which compelled philosophy students to adapt to the digital and home environments as new spaces for learning. Their capacity to meet the learning competencies established by the academic program was affected by this abrupt change. That is why the *I—Learning Spaces* characterizes the indispensable connection between Philosophy Students' learning experience and their learning spaces. Student narratives show that the abrupt transition to distance learning changed the existential meaning of learning spaces in addition to the modality of instruction. Digital and home environments have replaced the classroom, which was once a common place for discussion. This has necessitated a reorganization of learning roles, practices, and expectations.

The succeeding sub-sections explain how philosophy students adapt to their digital learning spaces and home learning spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A.1. I—Digital Space

The I—Digital Space characterizes the opportunities and challenges philosophy students encountered when they transitioned to digital platforms in order to acquire the learning competencies. The digital environment became the primary space of academic life that redefined the conditions under which the learning competencies prescribed in the AB Philosophy curriculum were demonstrated. According to the students' narratives, their capacity to maintain philosophical learning and engagement was hampered by unpreparedness, infrastructural limitations, and unequal access.

The participants narrated that the transition to distance learning was too sudden. One participant said, *“The shift from in-person to online classes was really drastic... I'm sure I wasn't ready for that change at all... my productivity during online classes dropped”* (Participant 3). Aside from it, unequal access to learning because of the inadequacy of digital infrastructures emerged as a limiting factor to their learning acquisition. According to one participant, *“because our area was in a dead spot and there was no wi-fi, we had to go up to the rooftop just to catch a signal or go to the street to have a data connection”* (Participant 11). Another shared, *“I struggled a lot, especially with the internet connection. There were times when I would log in and out repeatedly... I would get so frustrated that I would just give up, because of this, I would just miss classes and lessons. So, I would be left behind.”* (Participant 4).

The participants shared narratives on unpreparedness and limitations of digital infrastructures affirm how their epistemic access and acquisition of philosophical competencies are compromised. Several studies argued that students faced disadvantages when digital infrastructure was limited or not available.²⁰ These experiences are not unique; rather, they are a reflection of larger systemic problems seen in the Philippine educational landscape. Even though students in this generation are often referred to as “digital natives,” many students still do not have access to the technology they need at home to support

20 Angel Sheen Conocono, et al., “Filipino Students' Experiences in Online Learning: A Meta-Synthesis,” *International Journal for Research in Applied Science & Engineering Technology* 11, no. 3 (2023): 1–11.; Jerome V. Cleofas and Ian Christopher N. Rocha, “Demographic, Gadget and Internet Profiles as Determinants of Disease and Consequence Related COVID-19 Anxiety among Filipino College Students,” *Education and Information Technologies* 26, no. 6 (2021): 6771–6786.; Niel Francis B. Casillano, “Challenges of Implementing an E-Learning Platform in an Internet Struggling Province in the Philippines,” *Indian Journal of Science and Technology* 12, no. 10 (2019): 1–4.

distance learning.²¹ According to some studies in the Philippines, students' ability to participate meaningfully in the learning process has been seriously affected by the inability to obtain stable internet connectivity, a lack of digital devices, limited mobile data, and inadequate technological infrastructure.²²

Philosophy students' experiences also demonstrate how these difficulties became opportunities to adapt to the new learning environments. One participant said, "*It was challenging at first, but I eventually adjusted, and it worked for me. I discovered that online learning had advantages as well when we returned to in-person instruction*" (Participant 11). Participants also said that because of the pandemic, they learn new things about the technology used and they are now more proficient in technology. "*It taught me to be literate, to be familiar with and to develop skills in using technology, especially the tools used in the classroom, like Google Meet. I had never heard of these tools before.*" (Participant 1).

The narratives on students' adaptation to the new learning space affirm their commitment to confront the challenges of distance learning, recognizing that although it was initially problematic, it remains a lived reality they need to cross to achieve their learning competencies. These accounts reflect Adedoyin and Soykan's study, who identified that despite the initial disruptions, students worldwide cultivated resilience and flexibility, recognizing online learning as a digital space for growth.²³ Thus, coping strategies of students to adapt during the pandemic, like learning technology, strengthened their ability to navigate learning independently in the new normal.

A.2. I—Home Space

The I—Home Space characterizes the transformation of the home into an alternative learning space. A space where philosophy students confronted

21 Nicanor L. Guinto, Brian D. Villaverde, and Shiela M. Manzanilla, "(Un)thinking the 'New' in the New Normal: Reflections on Ways Forward from the Southern Luzon State University," in *Higher Education Interventions During and Beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic*, ed. Fernando dI.C. Paragas (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies, 2021), 57–64.

22 Thessalou E. Gocotano, et al., "Higher Education Students' Challenges on Flexible Online Learning Implementation in the Rural Areas: A Philippine Case," *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research* 20, no. 7 (July 2021): 262-290: Also see, Barrot, Ilenares, and Del Rosario, "Students' Online Learning Challenges during the Pandemic."

23 Olasile Babatunde Adedoyin and Emrah Soykan, "COVID-19 Pandemic and Online Learning: The Challenges and Opportunities," *Interactive Learning Environments* 31, no. 3 (2020): 1-13.

the challenges of achieving the program's learning competencies. As the home replaced the traditional classroom, it became a hybrid space that blurred the boundaries between personal and academic life. The home shifted from a place of rest and family interaction into a contested learning environment, wherein the students' academic obligations redefined its meaning and function.

Since academic responsibilities happened at home, participants shared how challenging it is to delineate roles between school and home. One participant remarked,

There is a challenge in delineating roles. What exactly is my role? Even when I am in class meetings, the fact that I'm still at home doesn't disappear. So, there's trouble with maintaining a work-life balance... I struggled to maintain a healthy boundary between study and home responsibilities. Often, these tasks would blend together. (Participant 9).

Aside from it, their home-physical limitations become barriers to sustained philosophical engagement. According to some participants, these limitations include, unstable electrical supply, frequent interruptions, and a lack of a comfortable study space. *"My learning environment faced several challenges, including frequent brownouts, disruptive neighborhood noise, and a lack of a dedicated study area."* (Participant 10). Similarly, another participant added, *"It took three times as much work and adjustments to achieve learning competencies because I had to share a room with my brother, who was also a college student at the time"* (Participant 5).

The narratives reveal that the home, as a restructured academic space, matters in shaping the students' lived experiences in achieving the intended learning competencies. Studies indicated that the convergence of academic and home roles during the pandemic affects the learners' focus and engagement.²⁴ Moreover, Barrot et al. emphasized that the greatest challenge encountered by Filipino students in distance learning stemmed from the challenges encountered in their home environment as a site for academic engagement.²⁵ Thus, an unconducive learning environment disrupts the learner's capacity to engage meaningfully with their studies.²⁶ If this problem persists, learning productivity

24 Erwin E. Rotas and Michael B. Cahapay, "Difficulties in Remote Learning: Voices of Philippine University Students in the Wake of COVID-19 Crisis," *Asian Journal of Distance Education* 15, no. 2 (2020): 147-158; Ronnie E. Baticulon, et al., "Barriers to Online Learning in the Time of COVID-19: A National Survey of Medical Students in the Philippines," *Medical Science Educator* 31 (2021): 615-626.

25 Barrot, Llenares, and Del Rosario, "Students' Online Learning Challenges during the Pandemic."

26 Rotas and Cahapay, "Difficulties in Remote Learning."

and the utmost concentration of students are at stake. For philosophy students, whose discipline demands reflective thought, dialogical engagement, and sustained critical analysis, the lack of a stable learning space can hinder their capacity to meet the program learning outcomes.

Despite these difficulties, some participants shared that through gradual adaptation and reconfiguration of their home spaces, they were able to meet their learning needs. As one participant narrated,

Shifting my learning space from the traditional classroom to home was a little bit challenging, as I feel more motivated and focused when I'm in a classroom compared to the latter. It doesn't help that I did not have a room of my own when the pandemic started. Eventually, I had a space of my own, and from there, I slowly adjusted and adapted to the new learning set-up. (Participant 2).

This testimony highlights a process of spatial negotiation and self-adjustment, where students redefined their sense of place to reclaim focus and agency over their studies. This is echoed by Gatlin et al. arguing that students who organized and adapted their home spaces to create more conducive learning environments were found to achieve higher levels of academic success.²⁷

Nevertheless, a supportive learning environment, particularly the family members at home, helps them cope with the challenges at home as a learning space. This will be further discussed in the succeeding sections.

Hence, in *I—Learning Spaces* demonstrate that education is spatialized form of 'becoming'. Here, space is not empty, but it is a place where ideas are encountered. Both *I—Digital Space* and *I—Home Space* revealed that learning spaces in the pandemic is more than just a physical space, it is a lived-relational environment where meaning-making occur. These 'new learning spaces' reshape not only the location of learning but the conditions under which philosophical reflection, dialogue, and growth can occur. Indeed, Dewey is right when he argued that education does not occur in a vacuum but is deeply influenced by context and environment.²⁸ This also reconfigures the false stability to traditional classrooms as the sole locus of philosophical place of inquiry. The pandemic crisis uncovers the reality that learning spaces are contingent to the learners' capacity to dwell meaningfully with any given circumstance and space. However, the challenges and struggles experienced by the students in both the

27 Anna Ruth Gatlin, Sally Ann Swearingen, and Lindsay Tan, "COVID-19 Study Spaces: Supportive Adaptation of Home Learning Environments During the Pandemic," *Journal of Learning Spaces* 11, no. 1 (2022):79-92.

28 Dewey, *Democracy and Education*.

digital and home spaces revealed the structural limitations and inequalities that constrain equitable access to meaningful learning. Therefore, there is a need to create learning spaces that is responsive to the lived realities of the students and could nurture a space for philosophical thinking.

B. *I—Thou Learning: Achieving Learning Competencies with Others*

Another theme that emerged is the *I—Thou Learning*. This characterizes how students encountered their lived realities in the *world-with-others*. This is the dialogical and relational aspect of Philosophy Students' learning with "others" in attaining the learning competencies. Based on the narratives, the participants' relation toward their educators, family, and peers is an essential social support system in achieving the learning competencies. The presence of a social support system creates a sense of belonging that enables students to succeed in distance learning, while their absence creates a sense of alienation.

These interconnected aspects create a supportive educational ecosystem that enables philosophy students to thrive despite the challenges posed by distance learning. This support system enables the students to stay connected, motivated and engaged in the learning process that enables them to fulfill their academic pursuits.

The succeeding sub-sections explain how the "I" (philosophy student) gives meaning to achieving their learning competencies in the presence of "others" (Educators, Family, and Peers).

B.1. *I—Thou (Educators' Presence)*

The first characterization of *I—Thou Learning* is "*Educators' Presence*." It emphasizes the reciprocal connection between the philosophy students and their educators. The presence of the educators is essential in meaning-making. In the *I—Thou (Educators' Presence) Learning*, students connect with their educators not just as simple knowledge givers, but as persons who can empathized in their learning struggles and growth. The educators' character, pedagogy, and in-depth knowledge of the subject matter had become the main elements of motivating and engaging students when the distance learning challenges were in place.

The narratives of the participants show that the educators' presence is a critical support system in maintaining continuity and connection during the pandemic. As one participant expressed, "*First is Prof. X's passion. His passion for teaching is incredible. His passion is so strong that even at night, he replies to messages. Moreover, I saw how passionate everyone is in the department*"

(Participant 1). Another stressed the need for leniency and understanding, saying, *“I wasn’t in the right environment to learn. That is why I appreciated the leniency regarding submissions and deadlines. Leniency alone helped me to actually finish my tasks, even though I was struggling in my situation”* (Participant 3). Indeed, some study shows that teachers’ empathy is a significant predictor of students’ learning experience.²⁹ Moreover, it is also suggested that educators’ support, directly or indirectly, affects students’ academic achievements.³⁰ Therefore, during times of disruption, educators must embody virtues like empathy and compassion to sustain meaningful learning.

Moreover, aside from the educators’ character, participants also shared the importance of their teaching pedagogy and mastery of the ‘courses’ in achieving philosophical competencies. They described their philosophy teachers as having the expertise to nurture their thoughts. They can simplify difficult philosophical concepts despite the limitations of online learning. As one participant recounted, *“Our professors had the ability to efficiently deliver concepts in layperson’s terms. They really did their best to present the concepts in a way that was very easy to digest. They employed different approaches to achieve this”* (Participant 3). Another reflected, *“They never made us feel that philosophy is hard. While philosophy is challenging, they made it easier for us to understand, not to the point of spoon-feeding us. They exemplify critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and the effectiveness in argumentation in the discussions”* (Participant 4). Similarly, another added, *“During online classes, even though they are lenient and very considerate, you can still see their mastery and how they deliver lessons and topics”* (Participant 5). These narratives demonstrate how important the expertise of educators is in meaning-making. Mastery and pedagogy are crucial because, as Lapitan et al. stated, teachers who are proficient in their subject matter are better able to simplify and convey complex concepts, and those who are pedagogically adaptive are able to create learning experiences that are both compassionate and meaningful, especially in digital learning environments.³¹ The pandemic reveals this necessity. In distance learning,

29 Hagit Meishar-Tal, Ariella Levenberg, and Eyal Rabin, “Empathy or Students’ Activation? Factors Affecting Students’ Remote Learning Experience during the COVID-19 Period,” *International Journal of Technology Enhanced Learning* 15, no. 3 (2023): 311–328.

30 See Liang Huang and Dongsheng Wang, “Teacher Support, Academic Self-Efficacy, Student Engagement, and Academic Achievement in Emergency Online Learning,” *Behavioral Sciences* 13, no. 9 (2023): 704.

31 L. D. S. Lapitan Jr., et al., “An Effective Blended Online Teaching and Learning Strategy during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Education for Chemical Engineers* 35 (2021): 116–131.

educators are required to innovate methods that integrate technology with effective instructional strategies.³²

However, some students described instances where teachers' involvement was inconsistent. Participant 8 noted that although some teachers were responsive and approachable, others exhibited what they called "ghosting" behavior. These teachers are just being active at first but then disappearing for much of the term before appearing for final exams. These discrepancies emphasize how crucial a consistent presence of educators is to keeping student connection and learning continuity. This only affirms that teachers' presence and effective teaching is vital to stay connected in learning.³³

Thus, *the I—Thou (Educators' Presence) Learning* reveals that learning does not happen in isolation but it is a relational act between the educators and the students. It is a learning connection where educators' character, mastery, and teaching pedagogy are essential in order for the student to stay connected and committed to learning the competencies.

B.2. I—Thou (Family Presence)

"Family Presence" is the second characterization of *I—Thou Learning*. It characterizes the role of family relationships in maintaining the motivational and learning capability of philosophy students throughout the pandemic. In the context of *I—Thou Learning*, the family becomes a key relational presence of learning. The students' narratives show that when family members are supportive and understanding, the home transforms into a meaningful learning environment that reflects care, dialogue, and shared purpose.

The participants discussed how, in spite of the challenges associated with distance learning, their families' support allowed them to continue their academic journey. As one participant shared, "*First and foremost, it's my family. The environment at home is very supportive, and they understand my schedule.*" (Participant 11). Another stated, "*My parents are very supportive of my studies because they value education as much as I do. I think that is one reason why I haven't given up on this degree... why I haven't quit*" (Participant 12). Likewise, Participant 4 commented, "*During that time, I was able to explain to my parents how online classes work and requested them not to disturb me while studying.*

32 Lapitan Jr. et al., "An Effective Blended Online Teaching and Learning Strategy."

33 See Meredith Tharapos, et al., "Effective Teaching, Student Engagement and Student Satisfaction during the COVID19 Pandemic: Evidence from Business Students' Qualitative Survey Evaluations," *Accounting & Finance* 63, no. 3 (2023): 3173–3192.

When you have a strong foundation or support system at home, online classes become much easier.”

Nonetheless, not every participant reported having the same supportive family dynamics. Some of them encountered disrupted family dynamics that affected their learning rhythm and emotional well-being. As one participant expressed, *“They’re not very supportive. So, it is really hard. I end up studying only at night because they’re also strict with household chores”* (Participant 1). Another said, *“My household setting at that time was not conducive to learning at all. So, my overall mental and emotional state did not help me study or perform better in online classes”* (Participant 3).

The narratives showed how family dynamics can impact the acquisition of students’ learning competencies. Studies showed that distance learning necessitates family member, particularly the parents to act as home-based educators.³⁴ This is because parental involvement in the learner’s home schooling can improved academic outcomes.³⁵ When family members are supportive, students have the capacity to achieve the set learning competencies. In contrary, when parents fail to provide conducive learning conditions at home, because of their negative perspectives, students’ capacity to achieve learning competencies are affected.³⁶ Furthermore, the findings suggest that family disengagement with the learner limits their capacity to stay engaged in their studies. These accounts explain how the absence or inadequacy of family support negatively affects students’ learning and well-being. The lack of understanding within the household diminishes the *I–Thou* dimension of family relations, reducing it to an *I–It* encounter, where students’ academic needs are treated as secondary to routine household obligations.

Thus, the *I–Thou (Family Presence)* learning emphasizes the family’s indispensable role in shaping a conducive home environment necessary for achieving learning competencies. The presence of family embodies the *I–Thou* encounter, where mutual understanding and presence transform the home into

34 Casper Boongaling Agaton and Lavinia Javier Cueto, “Learning at Home: Parents’ Lived Experiences on Distance Learning during COVID19 Pandemic in the Philippines,” *International Journal of Evaluation and Research in Education* 10, no. 3 (2021): 901–911; Sinta Maulida Hapsari, Sugito Sugito, and Puji Yanti Fauziah, “Parent’s Involvement in Early Childhood Education during the Covid-19 Pandemic Period,” *Jurnal Pendidikan Progresif* 10, no. 2 (2020): 298–311.

35 Agaton and Cueto, “Learning at Home.”: Hapsari, Sugito, and Fauziah, “Parent’s Involvement in Early Childhood Education.”

36 Chuanmei Dong, Simin Cao, and Hui Li, “Young Children’s Online Learning during COVID-19 Pandemic: Chinese Parents’ Beliefs and Attitudes,” *Children and Youth Services Review* 118 (2020): 105440.

a shared space of care and learning. Conversely, the absence of such relational support fractures this dialogical connection, revealing how disconnection within the family can translate into academic struggle and diminished well-being.

B.3. I—Thou (Peer Learning Presence)

“Peer Learning Presence” is the third characterization of *I—Thou Learning*. This characterization emphasizes that in meaning-making, philosophy students and their peers should have an interdependent connection. In this learning, the peer relationship transcends mere companionship. It is a dialogical and co-constitutive presence that sustains motivation and a sense of belonging. This would help reinforce academic resilience. The narratives show that peer relationships were important sources of support and feedback mechanisms through which the students could achieve the learning competencies in the AB Philosophy program.

According to one participant, *“I think my friends inspired me to study and complete my tasks because I am seeing them actively working on their own tasks. They encouraged me to complete my work whenever we met in person and communicated virtually”* (Participant 3). Another shared, *“The friendship we developed during the pandemic provided strong emotional support...Because of those formed friendships, I feel like I can share my struggles with them,”* (Participant 2). For others, seeking feedback from peers and having a collaborative understandings were important in promoting critical thinking and reflective insight: *“They help me by providing feedback and offering their perspectives. It’s valuable to gain insights from how they approach things, especially when writing a paper”* (Participant 5). Another shared, *“I recall my strategy was to engage in dialogue. Even though I could not see my classmates, I would still ask them questions or interact as much as possible with my groupmates”* (Participant 9).

Such narratives indicate that peer relationships are significant factors that provide a dialogic nature for students’ philosophical learning. In line with Wissing et al., the presence of peers during online education reduced negative effects and kept students’ motivation and satisfaction high even in the difficult conditions of distance learning.³⁷ Also, Gherghel et al. stated that online classes with peer interaction led to students being more involved and self-directed in learning, pointing out that the essence of the interactive environment is

37 Ruben Oscar Wissing, et al., “Peer Relationships Buffer the Negative Association of Online Education with Education Satisfaction and Subsequently with Study Engagement among Undergraduate Medical Students,” *BMC Medical Education* 22, no. 1 (2022): 276.

connection and inclusion among the learners.³⁸ Local studies also support these findings: Barrot et al. made the claim that peer cooperation and online study groups were among the factors that contributed to students' learning,³⁹ whereas Cleofas pointed to peer-based coping as a source of emotional resilience and engagement.⁴⁰

The mentioned studies support the idea that peer interaction is an indispensable part of the learning process, particularly in philosophy, which requires dialogic learning. Students were allowed to articulate their thoughts, argue, and understand better through the interchange with their peers, which is strikingly similar to Buber's concept of the *I-Thou* relationship, where the self is revealed to the other and thus goes through the process of real understanding.⁴¹ It can be said that the students' experiences of learning through peers were the reflection of a communal epistemology that relies on sharing rather than constructing knowledge individually.

Thus, *I-Thou* Learning in the frame of educators, family, and peers has the conclusion that learning is a process characterized by the significant interaction *with-others-in-the-world*. The persistent presence of the "*Thou*" restores the intersubjective ground upon which authentic learning can occur. In addition, this interactive interconnection reactivates the fundamental humanity of the educational experience. Combined, these presences constitute a care and co-presence constellation placing learning within a shared lifeworld. The experiences of philosophy students show that learning is *being-with-others*, to meet, talk, and develop in a network of relational meaning that promotes both the intellectual and moral growth and that is why it is so important to learn while being together.

C. *I—I (self) Learning: A Nexus for Achieving Learning Competencies with Oneself*

The *I—I (Self) Learning* is the third characterization of the "*I-Learning*" experience. This emphasizes the confrontation of the self with itself as a site

38 Claudia Gherghel, Shoko Yasuda, and Yosuke Kita, "Interaction during Online Classes Fosters Engagement with Learning and Self-Directed Study Both in the First and Second Years of the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Computers & Education* 200 (2023): 104795.

39 Barrot, Llenares, and Del Rosario, "Students' Online Learning Challenges during the Pandemic."

40 Jerome V. Cleofas, "Self-Care Practices and Online Student Engagement during COVID-19 in the Philippines: A Mixed Methods Study," *Issues in Educational Research* 31, no. 3 (2021): 699-717.

41 see Buber, *I and Thou*.

of learning. This characterizes the significance of internal mechanisms and self-directed efforts that philosophy students undertake to reach the learning competencies set by the Philosophy Program. It points to the holistic approach, where students actively engage their knowledge (mind), personal (soul) and physical (body) capacities in the learning process. The concept of “nexus” draws attention to the reality of the students’ learning conditions and its relationship with the acquisition of philosophical knowledge, personal attributes, and physical well-being during the pandemic.

The succeeding sub-sections explain the *I-I (Self) Learning*, which highlights three interconnected subthemes: *I—Mind Learning* (philosophical knowledge), *I—Soul Learning* (personal attributes) and *I—Body Learning* (physical well-being).

C.1. I—Mind Learning: Nexus to Philosophical Knowledge

The *I—Mind Learning* characterizes the learning approaches of the “I” (philosophy students) in learning and internalizing philosophical knowledge necessary for gaining the learning competencies mandated in the AB Philosophy program. It exemplifies how learners, in the midst of pandemic disruptions, exercised agency, self-discipline, and intellectual curiosity to maintain philosophical inquiry. In the context of *I—I (Self) Learning*, the “Mind” is the epistemic site of critical thinking and self-directed inquiry, wherein learning becomes both an act of independence and self-formation.

The narratives show how they learn self-directed learning (SDL) strategies in order to continue their philosophical study in the absence or lack of direct supervision. As one learner puts it, “*As a philosophy student, since we are given texts and readings, I always make sure to take notes. Every time I read a paragraph; I take notes on my own understanding of it...*” (Participant 4). Another shared, “*In asynchronous sessions, I expand on the notes I have taken by delving deeper into the suggested readings... it is my turn to act on and contribute to the topic based on my understanding and reflections*” (Participant 8). Additionally, the participants explained how they used metacognitive strategies and time-management skills like the Pomodoro technique and task monitors to stay focused and productive. “*My learning strategies include watching videos and using the Pomodoro technique to improve my focus... I also used a task tracker to keep track of important and urgent tasks*” (Participant 11). These narratives provide proof of the students’ shift from being passive to being proactive learners, that is, using reading, note-taking, and critical interpretation to understand philosophical concepts.

SDL among philosophy students aligns with empirical evidence. Almomani et al. found that the shift to distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic significantly enhanced students' motivation and SDL skills, enabling them to become independent and responsible for their academic progress.⁴² Their study further highlighted that students in distance learning environments established important skills for learning; organizational skills, effective learning management skills, learning resource use skills, and self-evaluation skills.⁴³ In line with these findings, philosophy students accessed additional digital resources, including *Crash Course Philosophy* and lectures on video, to enhance their understanding of abstract concepts and their independent study of philosophical texts.

The realm of philosophical education gives SDL a more reflective aspect: it turns into a method of critical engagement and dialogical reasoning. Several participants stated that apart from comprehension, they managed to acquire the skills of philosophical writing and argumentation, which are the main competencies of the discipline. One student shared, *"I write about what I can argue in response to various statements. I write down my arguments and create charts to organize them..."* (Participant 6). Another explained, *"In terms of writing, I've developed a style where I list all my ideas and then create an outline. From that outline, I start writing the entire piece..."* (Participant 9). Furthermore, listening and visualization also came forth as the main techniques among the students. *"I rely on my listening ability to understand concepts better..."* (Participant 1), one student noted.

Philosophical writing and argumentation are fundamental aspects of philosophy education.⁴⁴ It serves as an epistemic practice⁴⁵ and the primary means through which students cultivate the philosophical competencies prescribed in the AB Philosophy program. It is necessary that in the midst of the pandemic, philosophy students could learn these skills. According to Seuba and Castelló, writing helps students problematize their own ideas and provide

42 Laith M. Almomani, et al., "Self-Directed Learning Skills and Motivation during Distance Learning in the COVID-19 Pandemic (Case Study: The University of Jordan)," *Heliyon* 9, no. 9 (2023): e20018.

43 Almomani et al., "Self-Directed Learning Skills and Motivation."

44 Mariona Corcelles Seuba and Montserrat Castelló Badia, "Learning Philosophical Thinking through Collaborative Writing in Secondary Education," *Journal of Writing Research* 7, no. 1 (2015): 157–200.; Catarina Dutilh Novaes, "Argument and Argumentation," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified July 16, 2021.

45 see Dutilh Novaes, "Argument and Argumentation."

arguments to support them, indicating that writing is not just a medium but a way to engage in philosophical thinking.⁴⁶

Therefore, *I—Mind Learning* captures how philosophy students transformed isolation into ‘mind’ independence. The modes of self-regulation, reflective writing, and multimodal engagement employed by the students not only helped to maintain learning but also deepened their ability to conduct philosophical inquiry. These experiences uncover that the mind turns out to be the very ground of philosophical freedom, in which learning is no longer limited to instruction but arises through the conversation of the self with knowledge. Hence, the *I—I* relation in its cognitive aspect manifests the philosophical spirit of mind autonomy: learner as thinking and teaching self.

C.2. I—Soul Learning: Nexus to Personal Attributes

The *I—Soul Learning* characterizes the personal attributes of philosophy students that enabled them to sustain and achieve their learning competencies during the pandemic. The sudden change in the learning environment challenges not only students’ academic capacities but also their inner qualities. The narratives of the participants indicate that self-discipline, patience, perseverance, calmness, and strategic organization were important in adapting to the changing needs of distance learning.

As one participant shared, *“My mantra during that time was to work smarter, not harder... making a list of all the tasks I needed to complete and estimating the time required based on the difficulty of each task.”* (Participant 3). Another emphasized that *“There are times you need to be patient. You need patience, since without it, you cannot keep up, and the online class will not stop just because you cannot cope.”* (Participant 4). Others similarly spoke about having an emotional balance and calmness: *“I approached everything with a positive attitude and stayed calm... I made to-do lists and tackled tasks one at a time... I wasn’t emotionally overwhelmed.”* (Participant 5). For some, it was perseverance: *“My resilience and perseverance were what kept me going to finish tasks... The saying ‘No pain, no gain’ really stuck with me.”* (Participant 11). Another participant shared, *“It’s the spirit of not giving up... I needed to be strong because I had to graduate and earn my degree to secure good opportunities.”* (Participant 12).

These narratives show that internal virtues and self-regulatory habits are essential to the learning process. Composure, patience, and perseverance on the part of students reflect the virtue-based emotion regulation, with moral and emotional fortitude directing their adaptation. Kim et al. contended that

46 Corcelles Seuba and Castelló Badia, “Learning Philosophical Thinking.”

individuals possessing higher virtues, particularly practical wisdom, integrity, and emotional transcendence, exhibit stronger emotion-regulation capacities that help them cope with stress and uncertainty.⁴⁷ Moreover, Gazit and Eden found that students exhibiting higher levels of agreeableness, openness, and conscientiousness are better able to engage and persist in online environments, as these traits enhance self-regulation, time management, and emotional control.⁴⁸ These characteristics, reflecting on Aristotle's concepts of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and self-mastery, possess a moral leaning towards balance and discipline, helping learners in align their emotions, reason, and actions.⁴⁹ This suggests that learning during crises is not just about acquiring philosophical knowledge but also involves ethical and emotional growth.

Hence, the narratives of philosophy students reveal that the achievement of learning competencies during distance learning was not solely an outcome of pedagogical design or technological adaptation but also of *I—Soul Learning*, the inward cultivation of character and virtues. This inner aspect emphasizes that learning, even in virtual or disrupted spaces, remains an act of personal formation rooted in character that sustain intellectual and moral growth.

C.3. I—Body Learning: Nexus to Physical Well-being

The *I—Body Learning* characterizes the role of the body or the physical well-being in sustaining students' capacity to meet the learning competencies when in distance learning. The students' physical well-being was affected when learning suddenly happened at home and the boundaries between home and school spaces became blurry. This renders the physical well-being of students essential to maintain distance learning. With this, this subsection shed light on the experiences of philosophy students when it comes to their bodily conditions and self-care practices, which enabled them to cope with physical challenges.

The experiences of the participants demonstrate that for effective learning, it is essential to consider that the body also has its physical limitations. As one reflected, "*I told myself I would listen to my body because I cannot give what I do not have. If I am tired, if I am overly anxious about the things that are to be done, I would not really accomplish it because I do not have ample energy.*"

47 Jeong Han Kim, et al., "Emotion Regulation from a Virtue Perspective," *BMC Psychology* 12, no. 1 (2024): 11.

48 Tali Gazit and Sigal Eden, "Students Engagement in a Forced Distance Learning: The Relation to Personality Characteristics," *Educational Media International* 62, no. 1 (2024): 77–100.

49 Glen Pettigrove, "Virtue Ethics," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified October 11, 2022.

(Participant 8). Another expressed, *“I think what helped me cope through the pandemic was being more introspective. I had more time for myself, which allowed me to analyze my problems and emotions more deeply, and to reflect on how I could grow as a person.”* (Participant 9). Others likewise emphasized the necessity of maintaining physical activity and nourishment: *“My physical well-being deteriorated... Nevertheless, I tried my best to do exercise during the weekends. I am also grateful that my mother brings me food for large meals and snacks.”* (Participant 13).

Indeed, the body or the physical well-being is an important factor in achieving the learning competencies. Studies indicate a decline in physical activities among Filipino students,⁵⁰ which affects their learning. This emphasizes the importance of attending to one’s bodily condition. “Listening to the body”, within the *I-Body* learning, becomes a form of reflective awareness. Physical well-being forms part of the embodied practice for philosophy students where the mind and body work in harmony towards mind-body formation. According to a study, embodied learning can improve learning performance and that attention to the body matters for learning.⁵¹ The *I—Body Learning* argues that the acquisition of philosophical learning competencies cannot be achieved without looking into one’s physical well-being. The narratives show that maintaining one’s body is not a distraction from academic life but a prerequisite for sustained philosophical learning. The body, in this regard, becomes a locus of learning, an embodied terrain through which resilience, self-sustaining motivation, and flexibility are fostered amidst crisis.

Thus, the *I—I (Self)* learning shows that philosophy students become the agents of their own ‘becoming’ as they acquire the competencies. The *I—I* relation reveals that education is an act of self-communion, where the learners confront the lived realities of themselves (their mind, personal attributes, and physical well-being) in meaning-making. Philosophically, it is an inward connection with oneself. This inward turn is not isolation, but a philosophical introspection of the self as a site of learning. With this, the learner could discover that the pursuit of learning competencies is act which is inseparable from the understanding of the self.

50 Angelita B. Cruz, Jean Marie Cando, and Hyun-Duck Kim, “Physical Activity, Sedentary Behavior, and Health States of University Students During the First Wave of COVID-19 Community Quarantine in the Philippines,” *Frontiers in Education* 7 (2022): 848273.

51 Zhiwei Liu, et al., “The Effect of Embodied Learning on Students’ Learning Performance: A Meta-Analysis,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 16 (2025).

CONCLUSION

This phenomenological study revealed that learning the competencies of AB-Philosophy during the pandemic is a relational-act-of-being. This led to the conceptualization of the “*I—Learning*” experience framework that explains how students make sense to their encountered challenges and opportunities in achieving the program learning competencies of the AB Philosophy. The “*I—Learning*” experience typifies interconnected themes: a) *I—Learning Spaces*, b) *I—Though Learning*, and c) *I—I (self) Learning* that reflect the students’ relational act of learning and meaning-making with their learning environments (physical/home or digital), their relationships with others (educators, family, and peers) and with oneself.

This study illuminate that philosophy students achieved the program learning competencies not through the ideal conditions but through confrontation to their lived realities. While participants shared narratives of successes, their “*I—Learning*” experience is always confronted with challenges and limitations. This means that the capacity to learn the competencies are interdependently linked to the quality of one’s learning spaces, their *co-belonging-with-others*, and one’s valuing of oneself. Furthermore, the “*I—learning*” experience framework not only affirms success but it uncovers the narratives on how to learn in crisis.

Thus, the findings of this study bring some practical implications. First, there is a need to reimagine learning spaces that is devoid of any structural limitations that could cause issues on access in order to establish a learning space that is accessible and inclusive; second, develop learning and teaching pedagogies that could sustain the *I-thou* encounter necessary for the achievement of learning competencies; third, to create mechanisms that attends to one’s mental, emotional and bodily well-being; and, fourth, develop self-directed but also relational autonomy, wherein independence is conditioned by the ethical responsibility towards oneself and others. These implications call for collective action from the entire learning community, particularly administrators and policymakers, to craft sustainable learning systems that are responsive and adaptive in times of disruption, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

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