

The Pre-Service Teachers' Learning Experience Amidst the Gradual Lifting of Social Distancing

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ABSTRACT

This research explored the learning experiences of Pre-service Teachers during the gradual easing of social distancing mandates amidst the COVID-19 lockdowns. A mixed-method research design was employed, combining survey and thematic analysis, guided by the elements of the Community of Inquiry framework: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. A total of 251 PTs from three renowned universities in Maguindanao and Cotabato City, Philippines, participated in the surveys. Additionally, seven intern supervisors from these institutions served as key informants during interviews, while ten cooperating teachers from partner schools provided insights through focus group discussions. The analysis revealed that PTs perceived their experiential learning as excellent across all critical elements. Social presence was observed when they built harmonious relationships with students, peers, and mentors, expressed empathy and care in their communication, and created a comfortable, safe, and secure learning environment. Cognitive presence emerged through dynamic student participation in class sessions and reflective practices. Finally, their teaching presence was evident in their diverse teaching strategies, use of appropriate language, effective design and organization of instructional materials, facilitation of instruction, assessment, and feedback. However, further in-depth studies may be required to ascertain whether similar patterns emerge across diverse demographic groups.

Keywords: Pre-service Teachers, Learning Experience, Social Presence, Cognitive Presence, Teaching Presence

INTRODUCTION

Pre-service teaching marks a pivotal stage in the education and preparation of future educators. It bridges theory and practice, where pre-service teachers (PT) can practice and apply their acquired knowledge

and skills in their teacher education program in real-world classroom environments. Traditionally, this occurs within the physical classroom where they directly engage with students. However, the advent of distance learning due to social distancing mandates caused by the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted this critical learning opportunity, necessitating a migration toward alternative teaching methodologies.

In the Philippines, two primary modes of instruction emerged during the early phase of social distancing. The first mode was online teaching, conducted through digital platforms like Google Classroom and Zoom, requiring teachers and students to have reliable internet access and capable devices. The second mode was modular-based instruction, where schools produced and distributed printed learning modules to students through parents or guardians. In this approach, the self-learning modules were designed assuming that students could learn the content independently, with occasional support from parents, who could fulfill the teacher's role if needed.

With the transition to distance learning, PTs could continue their internships. However, numerous challenges emerged. Research indicates that many were unprepared for teaching in such an environment (Abac & Villacruel, 2024; Alvi, 2024; Laguitao et al., 2021) and some lacked confidence (Alicante-Martel, 2024) in delivering lessons. Their struggles were further intensified by their limited knowledge of the information and communication technology (ICT) tools essential for distance teaching. These difficulties were amplified by technical issues, including having inadequate skills to facilitate online classes, poor internet connectivity and limited bandwidth allocations (Daniel et al., 2022), which directly impacted their teaching experiences. Furthermore, PTs may have missed opportunities to refine their pedagogical skills, as noted in (Fokkens-Bruinsma et al., 2024). This suggests that developing professional competencies, as described (Hill, 2021; Martin, 2024), was a significant challenge in this context.

The literature witnessed a plethora of research examining the learning experiences of PTs during the height of social distancing restrictions. However, the period when these measures were scaled back remains largely unexplored. During this transitional phase, traditional classroom instruction resumed with limited student attendance, while online and modular learning modalities continued to be implemented. Although earlier studies have examined prior experiences, they have not explicitly addressed how the changes influenced PTs' learning experience during this specific time frame.

To address the largely unexplored aspect of pre-service teachers' (PTs) training and bridge existing research gaps, this study examined their experiential learning using a sequential explanatory mixed-method design. The novelty of this research lies in its grounding in the Community of Inquiry (COI) framework, which emphasizes the interplay of social, cognitive, and teaching presence. We used and derived instruments anchored to the principles of COI (Fiock, 2020) to explore the learning experience of PTs during their online and modular teaching amid the gradual lifting of the social distancing mandates, focusing particularly in remote and underserved rural communities. Additionally, the study uniquely engaged not only PTs, but also their cooperating teachers (CTs) from partner schools and intern supervisors (ISs) from their respective institutions. Through this lens, we gained deeper insights into how these presences shaped PTs' instructional activities and overall learning experiences, especially as social distancing measures were gradually lifted.

METHOD

A sequential explanatory mixed-method research design was utilized to investigate the learning experiences of PTs enrolled in teacher education programs at three reputable universities located in the province of Maguindanao and Cotabato City, within the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). Quantitative and qualitative approaches were used to closely investigate the experiences of PTs when the social distancing measures in schools were gradually eased, allowing limited in-person classroom interactions during the entire second semester of 2021-2022 academic year.

In this study, the surveyed PTs were fourth-year students, pursuing degrees such as Bachelor of Secondary Education with majors in English, Mathematics, Science, and Music and Arts, Physical Education and Health, Bachelor of Technical-Vocational Teacher Education, and Bachelor in Elementary Education. All these students were enrolled in pre-service teaching programs, where they were expected to gain hands-on experience in classroom teaching, lesson facilitation, and participation in various teacher-related activities.

We used Slovin's formula (Bostley Muyembe Asenahabi & Peters Anselemo Ikoha, 2023) to determine the required sample size. The number of pre-service teachers (PTs) enrolled in each participating university was calculated using the formula, and the resulting figures were summed to obtain the total number of PT respondents for this study. Overall, this total was 251, which was deemed adequate for the research. To choose them, we used purposive sampling (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025), as sampling method that works well for selecting people who share certain characteristics, knowledge, and experiences (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024).

Purposive sampling was also used to identify the CTs who took part in the focus group. They were chosen because they directly supervised the PTs during their pre-service training. Of the 15 partner schools where PTs were deployed, 10 CTs agreed to join the FG discussions, which gathered insights from individuals with shared experiences. The same approach was used to select the key informants (KIs), who were IS from the three participating universities, forming a homogeneous group. In total, seven agreed to participate.

Before data collection, a quantitative questionnaire grounded in the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework, with instructional activities adapted from [9], was developed. Its reliability was tested with 45 pre-service teacher (PT) respondents from the participating universities, which is considered a sufficient sample size for such testing (Kennedy, 2022). All of them were enrolled in pre-service teaching, and recruited through convenience sampling.

The instrument's reliability was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha (α). The results showed that social presence ($\alpha = 0.83$) demonstrated high internal consistency. Likewise, cognitive presence ($\alpha = 0.89$) reflected high reliability,

while teaching presence ($\alpha = 0.93$) exhibited very high reliability. Furthermore, the instrument as a whole also showed very high overall reliability ($\alpha = 0.93$). These results suggest that the instrument consistently captures the intended constructs (Kennedy, 2022) and serves as a dependable tool for assessing social, cognitive, and teaching presence. As for its validity, the survey instrument underwent content validation by an expert panel comprised by three senior faculty members from the College of Education at the participating universities. This process follows an organized procedure for collecting and applying insights from experts (Dixon & Lazenby, 2023), making it appropriate for the needs of this study. This approach aligned with (Roebianto et al., 2023) stating that content validation should include constructive input to improve measurement instruments. Expert panelists contribute by reviewing and assessing the quality of the tools, ensuring they demonstrate acceptable psychometric properties before being used with larger samples. As for the interviews, a semi-structured interview guide was created for the focus group discussions and key informant interviews. Similarly, these were validated by the same expert panel.

Throughout the data-gathering process, ethical standards were upheld. All participating schools were thoroughly informed about the study, and consent was secured from each participant. During the survey, the PTs were provided with a detailed briefing on the research objectives, and those who agreed to participate proceeded to complete the questionnaires. Consent was also obtained from participants in the FG discussions and KI interviews. Before the interviews were recorded, participants were informed about the process and participated in a dry run. They were also assured that their insights would be treated with strict confidentiality.

After the data gathering procedure, all data were organized and prepared for analysis. The quantitative data collected from the PTs were aggregated and analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The analysis focused on calculating the mean and standard deviation, which were deemed appropriate for evaluating survey items related to the PTs' social, cognitive, and teaching presence. The results were then described according to predefined range descriptions, as outlined in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Social, Cognitive, and Teaching Presence Score Description

Scale	Range of Means	Description
4	3.26-4.00	Excellent Experience
3	2.51-3.25	Satisfactory Experience
2	1.76-2.50	Less Satisfactory
1	1.00-1.75	Unsatisfactory Experience

For the qualitative analysis, the interviews underwent a pre-processing stage. They were transcribed and translated into English, ensuring they remained accurate. Afterward, thematic analysis was applied to the text data, utilizing Colaizzi's comprehensive method, renowned for its rigorous approach to identifying, describing, and uncovering relevant themes.

Following this, the outcomes were triangulated using input from the CT and IS. By cross-verifying the results from multiple sources, a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the subject matter was achieved. This approach facilitated the integration of diverse perspectives from various respondents involved in the study, thereby reducing potential bias and enhancing the reliability of the results. The summary of the procedures undertaken is presented in Figure 1.

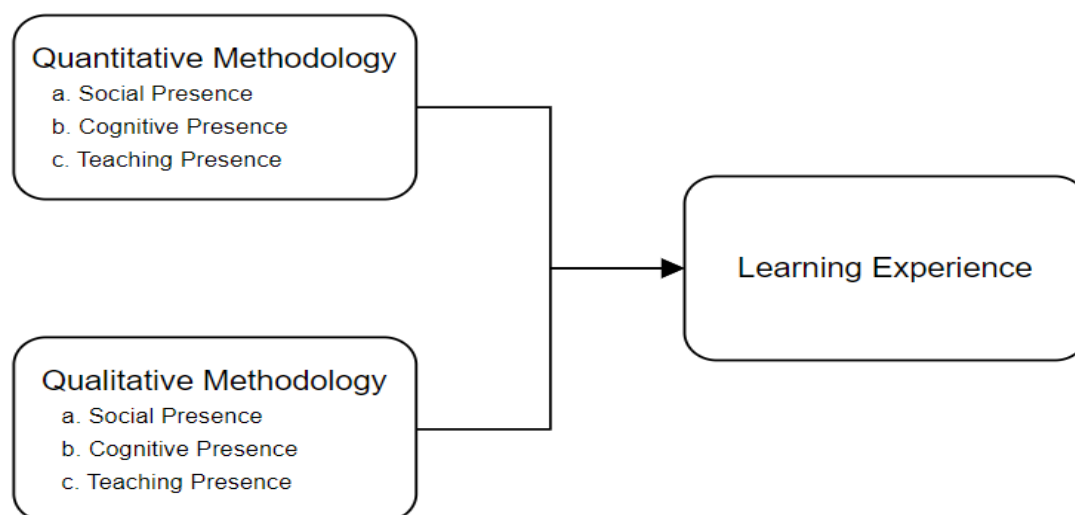


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the survey results and thematic analysis of PTs' learning experiences. The findings were systematically organized into social, cognitive, and teaching presence. Based on the analysis, valuable insights were uncovered.

Social Presence

We examined potential areas where PTs' social presence could emerge based on various identified instructional activities. Findings showed that PTs perceived their social presence as excellent experiences, especially when they actively engaged with students and facilitated course orientation discussions to build a

sense of community, and when PTs enabled student and teacher profiles in the learning management system, followed by other listed instructional activities. However, we found that it was slightly diminished in activities where feedback was provided through audio or video on assignments instead of text-based announcements, as indicated by the satisfactory experience in Table 2.

Table 2. Social Presence Across Different Instructional Activities

Instructional Activities	Mean	SD	Description
1. "Have dedicated discussions for course orientations to help build a sense of community."	3.48	0.641	Excellent Experience
2. "Provided opportunities for student and teacher profiles within the learning management system."	3.48	0.596	Excellent Experience
3. "Made class discussion a significant part of the grading system."	3.46	0.560	Excellent Experience
4. "Established rules of Netiquette for your course."	3.41	0.628	Excellent Experience
5. "Developed initial course activities (e.g., icebreakers) to encourage the development of swift trust."	3.39	0.592	Excellent Experience
6. "Used tracking mechanisms to reward reading as well as responding to messages through group chat, messenger, and other social applications."	3.38	0.590	Excellent Experience
7. "Created a "Meet Your Classmates" section of the course where you and the students introduce yourselves to one another."	3.35	0.642	Excellent Experience
8. "Established an appropriate social climate for in-group and cross-group communication that contributes to cultivating learning experiences."	3.31	0.591	Excellent Experience
9. "Created areas where students can communicate with each other through class email and student discussion."	3.30	0.659	Excellent Experience
10. "Used either audio or video to embed feedback on assignments instead of a text-based announcement."	3.22	0.729	Satisfactory Experience
Overall Mean	3.38	0.620	Excellent Experience

To further explore the social presence demonstrated by the PTs, we analyzed their feedback alongside observations from CT and supervisors. The thematic analysis revealed that their social presence was particularly noticeable in their instructional activities, as shown in Table 3. This presence focused on three primary areas.

Table 3. Social Presence Thematic Analysis

Theme	Sub-themes	Classroom learning experiences and observations
Building a sense of community	Strengthened bonds with students.	"I learned to connect with students to motivate them and spark their interest in the lessons I teach" (PT1). "I had more quality time with my students. Teaching in a small group was a refreshing experience." (PT59). "She maintained a harmonious relationship with her co-interns" (FG10).
	Enhanced interpersonal communication	"We learned how to build and nurture relationships with colleagues" (PT37). "We included students in all our activities as teachers, which helped them develop and strengthen their social relationships" (FG5).

		• “They fostered harmonious relationships, strengthened human connections, and built camaraderie, creating a supportive circle” (KI4).
Emotional presence and care in communications		• “We carefully crafted our messages to ensure clarity and understanding, paying close attention to both language and punctuation to avoid any misinterpretation of intent” (PT114). • “At the start of each session, they asked students to adjust their cameras to monitor attendance and evaluate their engagement and attentiveness” (FG2). • “They enhanced their personal qualities as teachers, becoming more caring, respectful, and values-driven, with a strong sense of integrity toward their students” (KI3).
Comfortable, safe, and Secure learning environment	Fostered a comfortable learning environment	• “Initially, their tone was demanding and authoritarian, making it challenging to connect with the learners. After we shared our observations and provided advice, they improved. By their next virtual teaching session, they successfully captured their students’ attention” (FG7). • “They considered their students’ cultural practices to prevent any form of discrimination” (KI4). • “Before their teaching sessions, the preservice teachers (PTs) would present guidelines outlining behaviors to avoid in the classroom” (KI5).
	Maintained a safe and secure learning environment	• “Even in virtual classes, they prioritized promoting a safe and secure learning environment, consistently addressing this before beginning their lectures” (FG7). • “They consistently enforced netiquette in their teaching practices” (FG10).

As found, PTs fostered a sense of community with their peers, mentors, and students. With more in-person interactions, they learned to build authentic and meaningful connections that facilitate open communication, group cohesion, and collaboration. This implied that PTs developed their interpersonal skills, which enabled them to work together effectively and productively. In teaching, this competency is vital for effective communication, classroom dynamics, and meeting learners’ emotional and interpersonal needs (Xie & Derakhshan, 2021). It is also essential for achieving deeper levels of engagement and learning (Kreijns et al., 2022).

The analysis also revealed that PTs exhibited emotional presence and care in their communications. They presented themselves as real individuals and teachers who care for their students, embodying the essence of social presence within the COI. It was evident in how they carefully crafted their messages to ensure clarity and understanding. Their care was further demonstrated by their proactive efforts to reach out to students. These behaviors are crucial, as positive teacher-student relationships inspire teachers to adopt effortful, complex, and impactful teaching practices that significantly contribute to improved student learning (Li et al., 2022). Previously, when classes were conducted remotely, there was limited opportunity for PTs to (Li et al., 2022)develop and refine this crucial aspect of building meaningful teacher-student connections (Agustina et al., 2024; Dündar & Guvendir, 2023; Reyes & others, 2023).

Moreover, social presence also emerged from PTs’ efforts to create a comfortable, safe, and secure learning environment. They ensured that class sessions were conducted in a way that promoted comfort in both physical and virtual spaces. This practice aligns with (Antoniuk et al., 2023), which emphasized the importance of protecting the learning environment and promoting safe learning conditions to support the emotional well-being of both students and teachers. Learning to foster such an environment is significant because it can influence students’ learning outcomes (Arenas et al., 2024).

In summary, our findings confirmed that PTs achieved higher levels of social presence in their teaching during the gradual easing of social distancing restrictions, despite limited interactions. The return of students to physical classrooms provided better opportunities for PTs to engage and connect. This is significant, as social presence directly influences learning presence (ElSayad, 2024).

Cognitive Presence

Table 4 shows that the PTs perceived their cognitive presence as excellent across various instructional activities during their training. They demonstrated particularly high levels of cognitive presence when they reflected on student-teacher interactions, encouraged students to share views and comments in discussions, and developed comprehensive learning modules that included opportunities for active learning, assessment, and feedback. However, it was least evident in activities that involved allowing students to create and post materials, search for resources, and contribute content, as indicated by satisfactory experience.

Table 4. Cognitive Presence Across Different Instructional Activities

Instructional Activities	Mean	SD	Description
1. "Reflected on student-teacher interactions. "	3.51	0.547	Excellent Experience
2. "Provided students' views and comments in conversations. "	3.42	0.590	Excellent Experience
3. "Developed general learning modules with opportunities for active learning, assessment, and feedback that can be shared among courses and/or accessed by students for enrichment"	3.41	0.561	Excellent Experience
4. "Presented words in spoken form, use words and pictures simultaneously to explain concepts. "	3.39	0.593	Excellent Experience
5. "Constructed a formative assessment scheme for peer-supported learning that enhances both the student learning and instructor teaching experiences. "	3.37	0.601	Excellent Experience
6. "Provided opportunities for higher-order learning and experiential learning to engage students. "	3.33	0.638	Excellent Experience
7. "Provided multiple representations of the knowledge you want students to learn and multiple activities for practicing desired skills. "	3.32	0.609	Excellent Experience
8. "Modeled and provided structured guidance, offering examples of papers and projects for samples. "	3.29	0.606	Excellent Experience
9. "Encouraged experimentation, divergent thinking, and multiple perspectives in online discussion through open-ended questions. "	3.26	0.653	Excellent Experience
10. "Let students create and post materials, and search out and post resources."	3.19	0.672	Satisfactory Experience
Overall Mean	3.35	0.610	Excellent Experience

To further explore the cognitive presence demonstrated by the PTs, we analyzed their feedback alongside observations from CT and supervisors. The thematic analysis revealed that it was particularly prominent in their instructional activities. As found, it manifested in two primary areas, which are detailed in Table 5.

Table 5. Cognitive Presence Thematic Analysis

Theme	Sub-themes	Classroom learning experiences and observations
Dynamic student participation	Active student participation	1. "I encountered students who showed little effort during class discussions. When no one wanted to participate, I actively encouraged them to share their answers" (PT217). 2. "I guided them by suggesting they pose questions and allow students to arrive at the correct answers, which they successfully implemented" (FG2). 3. "They effectively helped students articulate their ideas and enhanced their ability to process and understand knowledge" (KI4).
	Higher-order thinking Activities	4. "We tried to recognize differences in classroom learning and adjust our questions accordingly" (PT15). 5. "I learned the importance of delivering lessons effectively and assessing learners to target their higher-order thinking skills." (PT39). 6. "I observed that the PTs tailored their questions based on the students' IQ, differentiating and simplifying key questions depending on the activity" (FG10). 7. "The PTs demonstrated cognitive presence by conducting summative assessments through written exams, despite the challenges faced by the students" (KI3).

Personal and professional reflection		8. "I learned to use students' scores to evaluate my performance, emphasizing the need to be capable and adaptive both during and after teaching" (PT50). 9. "I learned how professional teachers utilize feedback and reflection to enhance their teaching practices" (PT92). 10. "My intern is very open-minded to corrections" (FG1). 11. "We identify areas that need improvement and discuss them thoroughly" (FG10). 12. "My pre-service teachers are learning to become effective educators. They welcomed criticisms from me to refine their instructional methods" (FG3). 13. "The pre-service teachers actively sought feedback from their students to enhance teaching and learning" (KI3).
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The results of the thematic analysis revealed that PTs' cognitive presence was particularly evident when they actively engaged students in their activities. They learned to encourage greater student participation and assist students in articulating their thoughts. Moreover, cognitive presence became apparent through learning activities that fostered critical thinking (Ligale, 2025). These are among the opportunities highly sought by PTs in pre-service training.

Previous research (Farrell, 2022) explained that reflection starts with an examination of observable actions during teaching, along with students' reactions throughout the lesson. Within this process, we found that PTs' cognitive presence emerged. They used their observations and feedback from CT and students to design classroom activities that were not only relevant and challenging but also collaborative and engaging, fostering deep thinking. These experiences likely encouraged them to expand their capacity for experimentation, promoting autonomy and deepening their understanding of effective teaching practices. This finding is consistent with (Tight, 2024), which argued that reflecting on practice and experience contributes to becoming better teachers.

Based on the themes discussed, there are several ways that cognitive presence can be observed. When student presence is limited, PTs can demonstrate it when encouraging students to articulate their thoughts and perform their work. It can also be shown through reflections, where PTs use feedback to improve their teaching-learning process.

Teaching Presence

We found that PTs' teaching presence was highly pronounced during their training. As shown in Table 6, they perceived excellent experiences across various instructional activities, with their presence being particularly strong after demonstrating good character and personality. Additionally, their teaching presence was especially noticeable when they promoted student-to-student interaction. It was also evident when they accounted for the cultural differences of their students in teaching, followed by the rest of the instructional activities identified. However, their teaching presence appeared slightly diminished in areas such as providing feedback to students and fostering collaboration within classroom activities, particularly in group projects, as indicated by satisfactory experiences.

Table 6. Teaching Presence Across Different Instructional Activities

Instructional Activities	Mean	SD	Description
1. "Had shown good character and personality. "	3.59	0.561	Excellent Experience
2. "Explicitly introduced the importance of student-to-student interaction. "	3.49	0.589	Excellent Experience
3. "Account for cultural differences. "	3.41	0.647	Excellent Experience
4. "Provided clear grading guidelines, including rubrics for complex assignments"	3.35	0.610	Excellent Experience
5. "Contributed to discussion forum throughout the week. "	3.31	0.676	Excellent Experience
6. "Be active in discussion boards; however, be aware that posting instructor ideas too soon can stop student discussion. "	3.28	0.660	Excellent Experience
7. "Prepared for the timely return of assignments and prompt response to students in email, chat, or discussion. "	3.27	0.713	Excellent Experience

8. “Used collaborative group projects to have students work on topics of their own choice that still meet the learning objectives of the course.”	3.25	0.724	Satisfactory Experience
9. “Restrained from being overly “present” in online discussions rather than facilitating student interaction.”	3.24	0.639	Satisfactory Experience
10. “Provided students with timely and supportive feedback, personalized feedback, and one-to-one emails.”	3.21	0.737	Satisfactory Experience
Overall Mean	3.34	0.660	Excellent Experience

An in-depth assessment of the teaching presence of PTs confirmed that they had a substantial teaching presence throughout their training. Table 7 reveals that their teaching presence was particularly pronounced in their instructional activities. As found, it manifested in four main areas.

Table 7. Teaching Presence Thematic Analysis

Themes	Sub-themes	Classroom learning experiences and observations
Diverse Teaching Strategies	Cross-curriculum teaching	• “We integrated a cross-curriculum approach into our lectures” (PT214). • “PTs learned to incorporate concepts from other subject areas to enhance their teaching of specific topics, going beyond the subject matter itself” (FG7). • “They utilized cross-curriculum or interdisciplinary approaches in Math, Science, and English through group activities” (KI4).
	Learner-centered instruction	• “I applied different teaching methods appropriate for the students” (PT219). • “Being student-centered in teaching is one of the key lessons I learned” (PT245). • “Their teaching remained student-centered despite the challenges” (FG8). • “The PTs learned to be flexible in addressing the diverse needs of students by using various teaching strategies suited to the learners” (KI2). • “They became more learner-centered in their teaching approach” (KI3).
Use of appropriate languages		• “When it comes to the medium of instruction, they sometimes use another language to help students acquire knowledge. However, they don’t code-switch all the time—only when delivering difficult lessons” (FG3). • “They frequently use polite and appreciative language when facilitating students’ activities” (KI3). • “Our PTs improved the way they deliver instruction over time” (KI4). • “While PTs were allowed to use the mother tongue, its use was restricted to teaching students at the elementary level” (KI6).
Design and organization of Instruction Materials		• “I learned to create lesson plans guided by the curriculum objectives” (PT239). • “We also saw them create lessons based on the objectives, which were not simply copies of the learning tasks provided to them” (FG6) • “They had their lessons reviewed first to ensure they aligned with the learning competencies” (FG6).

		• “They anchored their lessons to the objectives under the guidance of their cooperating teacher, even though the modules were pre-made” (KI4).
Facilitation of instruction	Modular Teaching	• “Sorting and retrieving modules are the tasks I learned to do” (PT10). • “I learned to be versatile in blended learning, especially when using technology” (PT28). • “I was responsible for arranging, separating, and distributing modules” (PT42). • “They relied entirely on modular learning, but it proved to be difficult” (FG8). • “The PTs improved their management of learning modules, including sorting, distributing, retrieving, checking worksheets, and recording” (KI4).
	Utilizing ICTs to supplement teaching	• “With ICT, I was able to capture the students’ interest while teaching” (PT248). • “I had the opportunity to incorporate ICT into creating my lesson plans and learning materials” (PT248). • “The PTs are well-versed in using ICT. Their presentations are excellent, and students can better visualize topics through PowerPoint slides. For example, in math, illustrations and sample problems are essential” (FG9). • “In terms of contents, the most important thing they learned was the use of ICT, which became their noticeable skill” (KI5). • “They were able to teach using video presentations remotely, but it was challenging for both them and their students. For instance, when teaching badminton in physical education, they had to demonstrate it at home without anyone to practice with” (KI6).
Assessment		• “I used higher-order thinking skills for my assessments” (PT10). • “I observed that she differentiates and simplifies key questions depending on the activities she is doing” (FG10). • “In modular teaching, it’s quite challenging to conduct assessments. Our PTs were not sure if their students were the ones completing the modules. In an online format, we also can’t assess whether they’ve learned skills like writing” (FG9) • “In terms of assessment and reporting, they were well-guided, and as a result, they were able to learn the entire process” (KI1). • “There were instances where PTs had to create video tutorials. For example, when teaching swimming, it was difficult to assess whether students learned to swim since there was no practical assessment. The students would simply demonstrate on surfaces like tables, and that was the extent of it.” (KI6)
Monitoring and feedback		• “We advise the PTs to respond to their students’ queries and share their scores immediately as feedback, especially during recitations” (FG2). • “They checked the learners’ outputs based on the modules since we were in distance learning at the time. Additionally, learners’ participation was assessed during virtual classes, which helped track their academic progress” (FG7).

		• “They became responsible for communicating the student’s needs, progress, and achievements to both the students and their parents” (KI3).
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The analysis revealed that PTs demonstrated their teaching presence through the incorporation of diverse strategies in their classroom instruction. This was evident in how they reinforced and expanded key concepts across various topics. Additionally, their teaching presence emerged as they adapted their approaches to address the different learning styles and backgrounds of their students. For aspiring educators, enhancing their skills to facilitate learner-centered teaching is crucial, since it fosters student autonomy, engagement, and collaboration (Oyelana et al., 2022).

Moreover, the analysis revealed that PTs displayed their teaching presence by using clear and appropriate language to effectively communicate learning materials to students. Fundamentally, developing this teaching competency is crucial, as strong oral communication skills greatly improve their ability to teach in classroom settings (Sayir et al., 2022). Teachers need to present concepts and ideas in a way that ensures students can fully grasp the material being taught. However, it can also be extended to addressing disciplinary and management issues, as reported (Korucu-Kış, 2021). These efforts by the PTs were likely motivated by the need to keep students engaged, prevent boredom, and cultivate a positive learning environment, as noted in (Fidan & Yıldırım, 2022).

We also found that PTs demonstrated their teaching presence when they designed and organized their instructional materials. They created lesson plans that are aligned with the target learning objectives. As observed, they learn to be creative in their works, which is a valuable competency in 21st-century teaching (Kasirer & Shnitzer-Meirovich, 2021). Although PTs lacked the expertise needed to be creative, the support and guidance of their CT compensated for this gap, enabling them to develop and refine their instructional approaches effectively.

The in-depth analysis also revealed that PTs’ teaching presence was evident in facilitating learners’ development. It was pronounced in online teaching, where they used ICT tools to capture students’ attention, helping them visualize complex topics. Learning how to utilize technology is crucial because it enhances students’ learning experiences by making the process exciting, interactive, and motivating (Alzubi, 2023), while also improving instructional practices (Akram et al., 2022). This learning experience aligns with the specific areas that should be targeted in teacher training programs, as highlighted in (Pozas & Letzel, 2023), particularly the need to train PT in effectively using ICT as a teaching tool. However, PTs projected a weaker teaching presence in modular-based teaching. While they developed management skills for sorting and distributing materials, the absence of direct interaction limited opportunities for real-time feedback, meaningful discourse, and collaborative engagement. Their instructional activities fell short of fostering the active learning essential for effective teaching, an experience in line with the experiences of teachers (Cabardo et al., 2022).

This research also found that PTs demonstrated teaching presence through their approaches to assessment. At the onset of social distancing measures, assessment became a challenge (Gonzales, 2023). This could be attributed to the fact that teachers could not provide direct guidance. In this study, we found that these persisted even with limited in-person interactions with students. There were apprehensions about the validity and authenticity of results coming from their assessments. We found that PTs addressed this by integrating higher-order thinking, fostering critical engagement in the classroom.

Finally, the PTs exhibited teaching presence in their feedback. They actively identified and addressed students’ needs, monitored their progress, and recognized their accomplishments. With these, they fostered a supportive learning environment that encouraged deeper engagement, meaningful reflection, and a more enriching learning experience. This aligns with (Aliabadi & Weisi, 2023) which highlights various strategies for promoting learner engagement.

In short, the analysis confirmed that PTs demonstrated a strong teaching presence during their training. This was particularly evident in their use of diverse teaching strategies, the design and organization of materials, the facilitation of instruction, and their approach to assessment and feedback. Before the limited return of in-person classes, these experiences fell short of expectations, leaving PTs disappointed as they could not fully apply what they had learned in an actual classroom setting. This suggests that while distance learning offers flexibility and accessibility, it may not be sufficient for fostering teaching presence. Therefore, in-person classes are crucial, as they allow PTs to engage in more interactive and hands-on teaching techniques that are essential for developing practical competencies.

Challenges Encountered

Further analysis was conducted to identify the challenges encountered by the PTs during their pre-service teaching. We found that they grappled with various complexities, which were later corroborated by the CTs and ISs during verification. These challenges spanned multiple areas, as shown in Table 8.

Table 8. Challenges Encountered by the Pre-service Teachers

Themes	Sub-themes	Classroom learning experiences and observations
Difficulty on online teaching and modular teaching.	Limited practical experience in online teaching	“Would it be possible to provide PTs with more exposure to the College's laboratory school before their deployment? They need more hands-on experience before being assigned to external placements.” (FG7) “Ensuring that interns are fully prepared before deployment is, in my opinion, something TEIs should prioritize.” (PT145)
	Limited exposure to modular teaching	“Collaboration with students was limited because the school implemented modular learning, which likely reduced the connection between students and teachers.” (PT91) “One of the problems we encountered during our pre-service teaching was the lack of interaction with students, especially since some of them were unable to come to school to pick up their modules.” (PT111) “During the distribution and retrieval of modules, some students weren't allowed by their parents to personally claim their modules. As a result, what was supposed to be a one-day distribution stretched into an entire week.” (FG6)
Difficulty in making lesson plans for online and modular learning modalities.		“Creating a lesson plan was extremely difficult for me because we did not receive enough training on this, especially in the context of online and modular learning.” (PT146) “The most important thing is to properly train pre-service teachers on lesson planning and delivery before they are deployed to their respective cooperating schools. This is our biggest struggle right now.” (PT54) “It would be better if lesson planning were strengthened.. These challenges should be identified as early as their first year so they can adjust sooner.” (FG10)
Limited time frame	Complying with the time frame allocated for lectures	“Time management has been my major challenge. It restricts my full ability to express myself.” (PT249) “Sometimes, the time alignment is not enough to discuss the topic” (PT204) “How to control the time in presenting the topic” (PT84)
	Burnout to the time schedule allot	“When it's more than one hour, they will just return. Maybe because it was too long that they become bored. Even the teacher, with two hours of speaking, becomes bored.” (FG1) “No one can stay fully engaged for four hours. I think thirty minutes is enough, yet even within that time, we sometimes struggle to keep students attentive. Some interns notice that by the end of an hour, only four students remain, even though there were many at the start. They leave and return later, probably because they get bored. Even teachers speaking for two hours straight get bored too. This is something DepEd needs to look into.” (FG2)
Delivery of instruction	Absence of reliable Internet access	“Delivering instruction is much more difficult for me because, as a PT living in a remote area, I struggle to find a signal to send instructions.” (PT55) “They can only connect to the internet here in our computer laboratory.” (FG9) “Sometimes, PTs cannot participate properly due to a lack of mobile data. When they rely on virtual or video calls, they often can't afford the cost. Fifty pesos of load is not enough to sustain an online class. The delivery of instruction was only satisfactory, just enough to compensate for teaching and learning during that time.” (KI3)
	Device ownership	“Some students could not attend our class due to the lack of available gadgets.” (PT39) “The insufficient or lack of electronic gadgets affected students' learning during the pandemic.” (KI3) “My problem with my PTs is that they don't have laptops.” (FG9)
	Insufficient skills to harness e-devices	“One of the major challenges I faced in achieving learning outcomes during instruction was my limited knowledge of using e-devices.” (PT42)
Fluency in the language of instruction.		“English communication remains a challenge.” (KI4) “I'm not very fluent when speaking English in front of a large audience.” (PT108)

		“Interns sometimes struggle to process or respond to students’ answers. While this does not apply to everyone, some have difficulty with sentence structure and selecting the appropriate domain for their objectives.” (FG10) “Fluency in the language of instruction is crucial for effectively delivering academic content.” (KI3)
Limited authentic teaching-learning experiences	Challenges in meeting diverse learning requirements	“When it comes to diverse learners, our teaching is limited. Even now, we don’t always know if students have autism or other special needs—we only hear about it from their parents.” (FG2) “They faced challenges due to limited exposure to real classroom settings.” (KI1)
	Limited opportunities to engage in a real classroom setting	“It appeared that they can’t relate to whether some of their students were smart or not. That is because before they start their demo, they give the students the answers to the activities.” (KI5) “Students’ answers were scripted during our observations, making it seem like everyone was smart. Teaching real students is entirely different.” (KI6) “They lacked sufficient experience, as some conducted their demonstrations with fellow PTs as their audience.” (KI5)
Getting students attention		“One of the biggest challenges in delivering instruction was dealing with non-responsive students. While some were highly engaged and eager to answer, others remained silent throughout the session.” (PT217) “It’s really difficult to capture students’ attention because we can’t see if they’re actually paying attention or just staying behind the camera.” (FG4) “Students will simply say they’re okay, but pre-service teachers can’t really tell. With cameras off, some might even be asleep.” (KI6)
Complex assessment		“I’m not sure if students truly understand the lesson.” (PT97) “With modular learning, it’s hard to tell if students are actually the ones answering their activities. We can only assess their learning when it’s online.” (FG9) “Since we can’t see them completing their work, the authenticity of student responses in modules can be questionable.” (FG2) “That’s the limitation of distance learning—we don’t know if students can actually grasp the lessons through the videos provided by teachers.” (KI6)

One of the prominent challenges PT encountered was their limited experience with diverse teaching modes before deployment. While they were familiar with face-to-face instruction, the transition to alternative modes, such as online and modular teaching, exposed significant gaps in their preparedness. This underscores the importance of integrating strategies that broaden PTs’ teaching competencies across various and often unfamiliar learning environments, while also providing them with practical, hands-on experience in different instructional modalities.

We also found that PTs faced difficulties with lesson planning. This is a common struggle, as they are still developing their skills as future educators (Cevikbas et al., 2024). It became more pronounced during their pre-service teaching, especially due to their limited preparation in designing lessons for online and modular instruction. Their prior training had mainly focused on planning for face-to-face interactions, leaving them less equipped to adapt to alternative teaching formats. The fact that they continued to struggle with lesson planning even after several months of engaging in alternative modes suggests that more time and targeted support are needed to effectively train PTs for diverse instructional settings.

Another problem we identified was the limited time allocated for PTs during their training. Some struggled to meet the prescribed duration for each lecture—certain topics could be covered more quickly, while others needed more time. Additionally, PTs sometimes experience burnout due to prolonged teaching sessions. Both PTs and their students tended to lose focus during extended lessons. When this happened, learning was disrupted and retention decreased, as highlighted in the FG discussions. This points to the need for more flexible and responsive policies around instructional time. Addressing this issue is essential, as inadequate breaks and rigid pacing can hinder the learning process, especially when students are still processing previously discussed material (Singh et al., 2021).

Additionally, PTs continued to face challenges even as distance learning gradually became more manageable. Many still struggled with internet connectivity, as not all had access to reliable connections. Some even carried on with distance teaching without their own devices, which likely affected their productivity and limited the learning opportunities they could provide. This situation underscores the learning disparity brought about by distance education, favoring those who are economically privileged while leaving behind those with fewer resources. We

also observed signs of deficiencies in ICT skills, which may be partly attributed to the lack of access to personal devices.

Moreover, PTs experienced challenges related to fluency in their language of instruction. Our analysis suggests that some PTs struggled with articulating lectures, facilitating discussions, and providing thoughtful responses. This issue is critical, as limited mastery of the instructional language may significantly hinder students' learning experiences (Dy & Sumayao, 2023). As future professional educators, it is essential for PTs to strengthen this aspect of their teaching, given its impact on student engagement and their ability to navigate and adapt to the learning environment (Hamdani & others, 2024).

We also found that PTs had limited opportunities for authentic teaching-learning experiences. For example, they had few chances to develop competencies in addressing the diverse needs of students, especially those requiring special learning attention. In some cases, PTs conducted their teaching sessions with fellow PTs as their audience, primarily due to the lack of access to actual students for demonstration teaching. These scenarios fall short of genuine teaching practice and highlight the challenges of adequately preparing PTs for real classroom settings, particularly under distance learning arrangements.

Furthermore, the PTs struggled to capture students' attention. In online classes, some students were unresponsive and not fully engaged in the learning process, suggesting that some PTs had limited exposure to real classroom dynamics and lacked the skills needed to effectively engage learners. A different challenge emerged for those teaching in modular classes. Without real-time interaction, they had no direct way to engage students beyond the written instructions in the physical learning materials. These situations highlight the difficulty of maintaining student engagement in alternative teaching modes, ultimately limiting the overall effectiveness of instruction.

Lastly, assessments, including homework, exams, and projects, remained a complex challenge. PTs found it difficult to verify whether students were genuinely completing the work themselves, as they couldn't fully supervise or observe the process in person. Without direct oversight, students could easily claim ownership of work that may not have been their own, and PTs had limited means to confirm the authenticity of these submissions. This experience mirrors the challenges faced by professional teachers in similar distance learning contexts (Agtarap et al., 2024).

Potential Weakness and Limitations

Although the findings of this research are encouraging, they come with certain limitations. The results are based solely on responses from PTs in three higher education institutions and their partner schools in Maguindanao, with some extending into Sultan Kudarat Province. In the quantitative survey on social, cognitive, and teaching presence, the outcomes primarily reflect the perspectives of PTs, which may have been shaped by their individual experiences. To strengthen the validity of the findings, feedback from cooperating teachers (CTs) and instructional supervisors (ISs) was also gathered to help corroborate and contextualize the data.

This research also has limitations related to its scope and context. The pre-service training took place during an extraordinary period when the pandemic had severely disrupted education. The study specifically focused on a phase when COVID-19 restrictions were gradually being lifted, which presented unique challenges and required significant adjustments in instructional practices. Due to these circumstances, the research was unable to capture long-term insights into pre-service training and its lasting impact. Therefore, researchers should carefully consider these limitations when interpreting the results, as they may not be easily applicable to broader contexts or different stages of post-pandemic education.

CONCLUSION

The research highlights the value of using the Community of Inquiry framework to assess the pre-service training experiences of PTs, especially during the gradual easing of social distancing mandates—a period that has not been widely explored. This approach provided critical insights into how PTs' social, cognitive, and teaching presences developed under these unique conditions. Based on this framework, we found that PTs gained substantial learning experiences and demonstrated strong presence across all three domains, as confirmed by the pre-service teachers, their cooperating teachers and the intern supervisors. However, the research also revealed that PTs faced several challenges, including limited exposure to hands-on, online and modular teaching, difficulties in lesson planning for these modalities, struggles to comply with prescribed timeframes, fluency issues in the language of instruction, challenges in instructional delivery, limited authentic teaching-learning experiences, difficulties in engaging students, and complexities in assessment. These findings serve as point of metacognition for stronger preparation of PTs before their pre-service teaching, ensuring they are equipped with the competencies, experiences, support and tailor to the demands of time and the diverse teaching-learning processes.

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