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Learning to Learn at the Graduate Level: A Phenomenological Exploration of Academic Adaptation and Pedagogical Experiences Among MAEd Students

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ABSTRACT

Graduate education requires students to move beyond routine academic participation toward more independent, reflective, and self-directed learning. This phenomenological study explored how Master of Arts in Education (MAEd) students at Northeastern College experienced academic adaptation and developed learning skills within graduate-level pedagogy. The inquiry focused on how students adjusted to advanced academic expectations, managed competing responsibilities, engaged with research-oriented tasks, and responded to teaching practices that shaped their learning. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with purposively selected MAEd students and analyzed through phenomenological thematic procedures. Participants described both positive and negative experiences. Challenges included time pressure, academic writing difficulties, research anxiety, demanding readings, and balancing work and family responsibilities. Positive experiences included greater independence, stronger critical thinking, improved research competence, reflective practice, and increased confidence as professionals. The findings suggest that graduate pedagogy becomes more meaningful when it promotes active inquiry, scaffolded academic support, reflective learning, and flexible but rigorous engagement. The study highlights the importance of supporting MAEd students not only in mastering course content but also in learning how to become adaptive, independent, and reflective graduate learners.

Keywords: graduate learning, MAEd students, academic adaptation, pedagogy, self-directed learning, phenomenology, graduate education

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1. Introduction

Graduate education has increasingly become a space where students are expected not only to acquire advanced disciplinary knowledge but also to develop the capacity to learn independently, critically, and reflectively. Graduate students are generally required to engage with complex literature, produce scholarly writing, conduct research, participate in academic discourse, and apply theory to professional practice. These demands make self-regulation, academic adaptation, and learning-to-learn skills central to success in postgraduate education. Recent research on graduate students has shown that adjustment and motivation are closely connected with the use of self-regulated learning strategies, particularly when students face difficult academic tasks and competing personal responsibilities. A 2024 study involving graduate students in the United States found that adjustment, motivation, and psychological conditions influenced students' use of self-regulated learning strategies, underscoring the importance of helping postgraduate learners manage both cognitive and contextual demands.

The increasing emphasis on research productivity, internationalization, and knowledge creation has placed greater academic demands on graduate students. Contemporary graduate education requires students to move beyond passive reception of information toward inquiry, independent knowledge construction, scholarly communication, and evidence-based professional judgment. However, international and comparative studies indicate that graduate students frequently encounter challenges related to research competence, academic writing, time management, confidence, and the need to balance study with employment and family responsibilities. These challenges can affect how students adapt to graduate education and how effectively they develop advanced learning strategies. The literature also suggests that academic rigor becomes more productive when supported by mentoring, structured feedback, research training, and pedagogical approaches that encourage reflection and active inquiry rather than simple content transmission.

Within the broader field of adult and graduate learning, the concept of **learning to learn** is particularly important. It refers to learners' capacity to understand their own learning processes, identify appropriate strategies, regulate effort, monitor progress, respond to setbacks, and assume increasing responsibility for academic outcomes. At the graduate level, these abilities are essential because students are often expected to work independently and manage open-ended academic tasks. Graduate pedagogy therefore has a significant influence on how these competencies develop. Practices such as collaborative inquiry, research-based tasks, case analysis, reflective writing, seminar discussion, mentoring, and constructive feedback can strengthen academic independence and deeper learning. In contrast, demanding academic requirements without adequate scaffolding may contribute to uncertainty, anxiety, and disengagement.

In the Philippine context, these issues are equally significant because many graduate students are working professionals who pursue advanced degrees while managing employment, family obligations, financial responsibilities, and academic requirements. Philippine studies show that graduate students frequently encounter challenges related to research writing, methodological knowledge, scheduling, financial constraints, academic resources, and mentoring. Casanova (2021), in a study of graduate students in a Philippine state-run higher education institution, found that students encountered difficulties such as limited resources, challenges in selecting researchable topics, and constraints in conducting research, while consultation with advisers, faculty support, peer assistance, and technology served as important coping strategies.

More recent Philippine research further confirms these concerns. Pangket and colleagues (2023), in their study of graduate students' research-writing readiness in a Philippine state college, reported that students experienced difficulty with research and statistical tools, indicating that entry into graduate education does not automatically guarantee readiness for advanced scholarly work. Similarly, Aceron (2026) found that graduate students in a Philippine state university encountered concerns related to research knowledge, instruction, advising, resources, finances, and scheduling, leading to recommendations for

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stronger research mentoring and institutional support. These findings suggest that graduate learning in the Philippines involves not only mastery of advanced content but also continuous adaptation to the demands of academic writing, research, independent study, and scholarly communication.

A Philippine study focusing specifically on the challenges of education graduate students likewise identified lack of time for research, work–study schedule conflicts, insufficient mentoring support, heavy workload, limited academic resources, financial concerns, and lack of confidence among the major difficulties experienced by graduate learners. The same study noted that students expressed a need for structured training, seminars, workshops, and stronger research support. These findings are especially relevant to Master of Arts in Education students, many of whom are simultaneously practicing teachers or education professionals. Their learning experiences are therefore shaped by the interaction of academic requirements and professional responsibilities.

At the local level, the context of Northeastern College provides a meaningful setting for examining these experiences. Northeastern College offers a Master of Arts in Education (MAEd) program as part of its graduate-level academic offerings, and the institution also offers MAEd in Language and Literature alongside other postgraduate programs. The Commission on Higher Education Regional Office II also lists Northeastern College's Master of Arts in Education among its recognized graduate programs. In addition, the institution has pursued higher accreditation for its graduate programs, including MAEd, reflecting an institutional emphasis on strengthening graduate education, research capacity, and academic quality.

Within this local setting, MAEd students are expected to engage with advanced coursework, scholarly readings, research requirements, academic writing, professional reflection, and the application of educational theories to practice. Yet these students may enter graduate school with different levels of academic preparation, research competence, digital literacy, confidence, and prior learning experience. Some may have substantial professional expertise but need further development in scholarly writing and research methodology; others may be academically confident but face difficulty balancing graduate study with teaching, administrative duties, and family commitments. These differences make academic adaptation a significant part of the graduate learning experience.

Despite the availability of studies on research readiness, research anxiety, graduate challenges, and academic performance, fewer studies have focused specifically on how MAEd students experience the process of learning to learn at the graduate level and how pedagogical experiences shape that adaptation. Existing Philippine studies tend to emphasize measurable challenges, research performance, or readiness, while less attention is given to the lived meaning of becoming an increasingly independent, reflective, and self-regulated graduate learner. This gap is important because academic adaptation is not simply a technical process; it involves changes in habits, confidence, identity, motivation, and approaches to professional learning.

Thus, the present study, seeks to explore how MAEd students make sense of their transition into advanced learning. Specifically, it examines how they adapt to graduate-level expectations, develop learning strategies, manage academic and professional responsibilities, experience graduate pedagogy, and transform academic challenges into opportunities for personal and professional growth. By foregrounding students' lived experiences, the study aims to contribute context-specific insights that may inform graduate pedagogy, academic support, research mentoring, and program development at Northeastern College and in comparable higher education institutions.

Research Questions

The study addressed the following questions:

1. How do MAEd students experience their transition and adaptation to graduate-level learning?
2. What learning skills do students develop as they progress through graduate education?
3. What challenges affect their academic adaptation?

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4. How do pedagogical practices influence their learning experiences?

5. How do graduate learning experiences contribute to students' academic and professional growth?

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 Graduate Learning and Academic Adaptation

Graduate study requires students to function with greater autonomy than in earlier levels of education. Students are expected to interpret complex readings, construct academic arguments, participate in scholarly dialogue, and independently manage major academic requirements. Academic adaptation therefore involves changes in study habits, time management, self-regulation, and approaches to knowledge.

Successful adjustment is not simply a matter of intelligence or prior achievement. It also depends on how learners respond to unfamiliar academic expectations, feedback, workload, and research requirements.

2.2 Self-Directed Learning

Self-directed learning is particularly important in graduate education. Knowles (1975) described self-directed learners as individuals who take responsibility for identifying learning needs, setting goals, locating resources, implementing strategies, and evaluating outcomes.

For MAEd students, self-directed learning may involve independent reading, research planning, consultation with faculty members, revision of academic work, and continuous improvement of professional knowledge.

2.3 Self-Regulated Learning

Self-regulated learning emphasizes students' ability to plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning processes. Zimmerman (2002) argued that effective learners use cognitive, motivational, and behavioral strategies to achieve academic goals.

At the graduate level, these strategies are particularly important because students must often complete demanding tasks while managing work and family responsibilities.

2.4 Graduate Pedagogy

Graduate pedagogy extends beyond content transmission. Effective graduate learning environments encourage analysis, reflection, questioning, application, and knowledge construction. Pedagogical practices such as seminar discussions, case-based learning, collaborative inquiry, research mentoring, reflective writing, and formative feedback can promote deeper engagement.

Thus, graduate learning is shaped by the interaction between students' adaptive capacities and the instructional environments provided by faculty.

3. Methodology

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of MAEd students at Northeastern College in adapting to graduate-level learning and developing academic learning skills. Participants were purposively selected MAEd students who had completed sufficient graduate coursework to reflect meaningfully on their academic experiences. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews focusing on adjustment to graduate study, learning strategies, academic challenges, experiences with teaching practices, research-related demands, time management, and perceived personal and professional growth. Follow-up questions were used to elicit deeper descriptions of significant experiences. The interview data were analyzed through repeated reading, identification of significant statements, coding, clustering of related meanings, and formulation of themes that represented the shared experience of graduate learning. Consistent with phenomenological inquiry, the analysis also considered textural descriptions of what participants experienced and structural descriptions of how those experiences occurred. Trustworthiness was strengthened through member checking, peer review of themes, an audit trail, and researcher reflexivity. Ethical principles included informed consent, voluntary

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participation, confidentiality, and the use of participant codes such as P1, P2, and P3.

4. Findings

Five major themes emerged from the participants' experiences.

Theme 1: Adjusting to the Demands of Graduate-Level Learning

Participants described graduate school as requiring a significant change in academic habits.

Negative Experiences

Some participants initially struggled with the volume and complexity of readings.

P2 shared: "Graduate school is very different because we are expected to read more and explain our own understanding, not just memorize information."

Another participant stated:

"The difficult part was academic writing because I knew what I wanted to say, but expressing it in a scholarly way was challenging." - **P4**

Positive Experiences

Over time, students became more comfortable with advanced academic demands.

P1 explained: "At first I felt overwhelmed, but I gradually learned how to organize the readings and focus on the important ideas."

Academic adaptation involves an initial period of difficulty followed by gradual development of strategies that enable students to respond more effectively to graduate-level expectations.

Theme 2: Developing Self-Directed and Strategic Learning Habits

Participants reported becoming more responsible for managing their own learning.

Positive Experiences

Students described learning to plan, prioritize, and study independently.

P3 stated: "I learned that I cannot wait for the professor to explain everything. I have to read ahead and look for additional sources."

Another participant shared:

"Graduate school taught me how to organize my tasks and set deadlines for myself." — **P6**

Negative Experiences

Self-direction could also be demanding when students were uncertain about academic expectations.

P5 explained: "Sometimes you know you have to work independently, but you are not sure if your interpretation is correct."

Graduate learning encouraged autonomy, but independence was most productive when accompanied by clear guidance and meaningful academic feedback.

Theme 3: Negotiating Academic Responsibilities With Professional and Personal Roles

Balancing responsibilities emerged as one of the most challenging aspects of graduate study.

Negative Experiences

Many participants experienced time pressure.

P1 stated: "After work, there are still family responsibilities, and then I have to read articles or finish requirements at night."

P7 added: "The challenge is not only the difficulty of the subject. Sometimes the biggest problem is finding enough time."

Positive Experiences

Despite these difficulties, students developed stronger time-management skills.

P4 explained: "I became more disciplined because I had to plan when to work, study, and attend to my family."

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Academic adaptation among MAEd students is closely tied to role negotiation. Graduate learning occurs within, rather than apart from, students' professional and family responsibilities.

Theme 4: Pedagogy as a Catalyst for Deeper Learning
Participants emphasized that teaching practices significantly influenced how deeply they engaged with graduate content.
Positive Experiences
Interactive discussion, case analysis, research tasks, and reflective activities were viewed as meaningful.
P5 stated: "I learn more when the professor asks us to connect theories with what we actually experience in school."
Another participant explained:
"Discussions are useful because we hear different perspectives from classmates who also have professional experiences." -**P2**
Constructive feedback was also valued.
P6 shared: "When the professor gives comments on my paper, I understand where I need to improve."
Negative Experiences
Participants reported difficulty when expectations were demanding but guidance was limited.
P3 stated: "It becomes stressful when the task is very technical and we are not yet familiar with how to do it."
Graduate pedagogy becomes more effective when rigor is combined with clear expectations, intellectual challenge, interaction, and developmental feedback.

Theme 5: Transforming Challenge Into Academic Confidence and Professional Growth
Participants described graduate school as demanding but transformative.
Positive Experiences
Students reported becoming more confident in academic discussion, writing, research, and professional decision-making.
P2 explained:
"Before, I was hesitant to express my ideas, but now I am more confident because I have learned how to support my views."
P5 added: "What I learn in graduate school also changes how I look at teaching. I reflect more on why I use certain strategies."
Negative Experiences
Growth was accompanied by periods of uncertainty and self-doubt.
P7 stated: "There were moments when I questioned whether I could finish, especially when the requirements became difficult."
Graduate learning is characterized by productive tension. Difficult academic experiences may initially produce uncertainty but can contribute to stronger confidence, resilience, and professional identity when students receive adequate support.

5. Summary of Themes

Theme	Positive Dimension	Negative Dimension
Graduate-Level Academic Adjustment	Stronger analytical and scholarly skills	Difficulty with advanced readings and academic writing
Self-Directed Learning	Greater independence and responsibility	Uncertainty when guidance is insufficient
Balancing Multiple Roles	Improved organization and discipline	Time pressure and competing responsibilities

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Theme	Positive Dimension	Negative Dimension
Pedagogical Experiences	Discussion, feedback, and application deepen learning	Complex tasks may become stressful without scaffolding
Academic and Professional Growth	Increased confidence, reflection, and competence	Periods of self-doubt and academic anxiety

6. Discussion

The findings indicate that learning at the graduate level is fundamentally an adaptive process. MAEd students do not merely acquire advanced knowledge; they gradually reconstruct how they approach learning. They become more independent, reflective, strategic, and responsible for academic outcomes.

The development of self-directed learning was central to participants' experiences. Students learned to seek information independently, manage readings, organize academic tasks, and monitor their own progress. This supports Knowles' (1975) view of adult learners as increasingly responsible for directing their learning.

The findings also reflect principles of self-regulated learning. Participants described planning, prioritizing, monitoring performance, and adjusting strategies—processes consistent with Zimmerman's (2002) conceptualization of self-regulated learners.

A distinctive feature of MAEd learning was the interaction between graduate study and professional practice. Students did not experience academic learning in isolation. They continuously connected theory to workplace experiences and, in turn, used professional experience to interpret academic concepts.

Pedagogical practices were also influential. Participants valued learning experiences that required dialogue, reflection, research, and practical application. These approaches encouraged students to become active meaning-makers rather than passive recipients of information.

However, academic rigor without sufficient guidance could create unnecessary uncertainty. Graduate pedagogy should therefore maintain intellectual challenge while providing appropriate scaffolding, particularly for research, scholarly writing, and technically demanding academic requirements.

7. Essence of the Phenomenon

The essence of learning to learn at the graduate level can be described as a gradual transformation from dependence on instruction toward reflective, strategic, and self-directed participation in advanced learning.

MAEd students learn not only new educational theories and practices but also how to manage complexity, question assumptions, construct scholarly arguments, regulate their own learning, and integrate academic knowledge with professional experience.

Graduate learning is therefore both academic and personal. It challenges students' existing habits while creating opportunities for greater confidence, independence, and professional maturity.

8. Conclusion

The study concludes that academic adaptation among MAEd students at Northeastern College involves significant changes in learning habits, self-regulation, time management, scholarly engagement, and professional reflection. Five themes characterized their experiences: adjusting to graduate-level demands, developing self-directed learning habits, balancing academic and personal responsibilities, experiencing pedagogy as a catalyst for deeper learning, and transforming challenge into confidence and professional growth.

The findings demonstrate that graduate learning is not simply a process of completing advanced coursework. It is a developmental experience through which students learn how to think, study, inquire, reflect, and participate more independently in academic and professional communities.

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Graduate programs should therefore provide rigorous but supportive pedagogical environments that strengthen academic writing, research competence, reflective practice, self-regulated learning, and opportunities to connect theory with educational practice.

9. Implications for Graduate Education

Northeastern College may strengthen MAEd learning by providing structured academic orientation for graduate students, particularly in scholarly reading, academic writing, research, citation practices, and time management. Faculty members may employ discussion-based, inquiry-oriented, case-based, and reflective pedagogies that allow students to connect theory with their professional experiences.

Graduate students may also benefit from research mentoring, writing consultations, peer-learning groups, formative feedback, and flexible academic support mechanisms. These approaches can preserve graduate-level rigor while helping students develop the learning skills required for independent scholarship.

10. Recommendations

Future studies may examine specific dimensions of graduate learning such as research anxiety, academic writing development, self-regulated learning, digital learning practices, or work–study balance. Comparative studies may also explore differences between beginning and advanced MAEd students or between students from different graduate programs.

A mixed-methods study could examine relationships among self-directed learning, academic adaptation, engagement, graduate GPA, research self-efficacy, and persistence.

Longitudinal research may also follow students across several semesters to examine how graduate learning skills develop over time.

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