



Exploring University Students' Lived Experiences in Facilitating Digital Literacy Empowerment within Rural Communities

Fathul Hasan^{1*}, Fadlun²

¹UIN Suska Riau, Indonesia

²UIN Datokarama Palu, Indonesia

¹fathulhasan@gmail.com*, ²fadlun@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Digital literacy is crucial for community development in rural areas where technological access and skills are limited. This study explores university students' lived experiences as facilitators of community-based digital literacy empowerment programs through an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Data were collected from semi-structured interviews with eight students. The findings show that students experienced identity shifts, developed resilience and empathy, and co-created sustainable digital literacy strategies with rural communities. These processes illustrate reciprocal learning, where students not only empowered local participants but also strengthened their professional identity. The study offers practical implications for designing context-sensitive and sustainable digital literacy programs and underscores the value of IPA in capturing the complexity of transformative learning within community initiatives.



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INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technology has profoundly reshaped various aspects of human life, including education, communication, and access to information. In recent years, governments, academic institutions, and social organizations have increasingly emphasized the integration of digital literacy within community development programs, particularly in rural and underserved areas (Felter et al., 2024). Digital literacy is now considered a crucial competency for social participation and economic empowerment, as it enables individuals to interact effectively with technology, access valuable resources, and engage in broader social networks. However, despite these advancements, many rural communities continue to face significant disparities in access to technology, digital skills, and relevant training opportunities.

In the Indonesian context, where diverse sociocultural and geographical settings coexist, the digital divide remains a critical issue influencing community development. Rural populations often encounter multiple challenges, including limited technological infrastructure, insufficient internet connectivity, and low levels of digital awareness. These barriers restrict opportunities for education, social inclusion, and economic participation. To address this gap, universities have introduced community service-based digital literacy programs as part of their social responsibility and educational mandates. These programs not only aim to improve technological competencies but also foster collaboration between students and local communities to achieve sustainable empowerment.

Within this context, students' experiences play a pivotal role in shaping the effectiveness and sustainability of such initiatives (Carr, 2003; Tambo et al., 2019). Students often navigate complex sociocultural dynamics, resource constraints, and varying community expectations while facilitating digital literacy training. These experiences are inherently subjective and deeply connected to participants' perceptions, emotions, and interpretations of their roles within the community. Understanding these experiences provides insights not only into the effectiveness of digital literacy

programs but also into the broader processes of personal transformation, community engagement, and sociocultural adaptation.

Given the centrality of human meaning-making in this context, there is an increasing need to explore the essence of these lived experiences rather than focusing solely on measurable outcomes or statistical impacts. The phenomenological approach offers a suitable framework for understanding how students interpret their experiences and construct personal and collective meanings within the broader social context. By investigating these subjective realities, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the intersection between digital empowerment, community service, and individual transformation, thereby filling a critical gap in current literature and practice.

Research on lived experiences within community-based digital literacy programs has gained increasing attention in recent years, particularly as scholars seek to understand how individuals make sense of their roles in addressing social and technological inequalities. Existing studies have highlighted the importance of student participation in community empowerment initiatives, emphasizing their potential to act as agents of change within underserved populations. However, despite growing recognition of the value of subjective experiences in shaping program outcomes, there remains a limited understanding of how students interpret, construct, and internalize the meanings of their involvement in these initiatives, especially within rural sociocultural contexts.

A significant challenge arises from the methodological limitations commonly found in prior research. Much of the existing literature on community service and digital literacy has relied heavily on quantitative frameworks that primarily measure outcomes, such as skill acquisition, program efficiency, or participant satisfaction (Bandzuh et al., 2022; Rutayisire et al., 2025). While these approaches provide useful statistical insights, they often fail to capture the depth, richness, and complexity of participants' lived experiences. The subjective dimensions of motivation, emotional adaptation, and identity transformation are frequently overlooked, leaving an incomplete understanding of how digital literacy initiatives influence both students and local communities.

Furthermore, even within qualitative studies, certain methodological approaches have been limited in their capacity to uncover the essence of participants' experiences. For example, descriptive surveys and surface-level interviews often lack sufficient depth to illuminate the underlying psychological and sociocultural dynamics at play. These limitations highlight the inadequacy of traditional methods for addressing phenomena that are deeply personal, context-dependent, and interpretative in nature.

To address these gaps, this study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA), which provides a rigorous framework for exploring participants' meaning-making processes in rich detail. By focusing on how students construct meaning from their engagement in digital literacy training within rural communities, this research aims to reveal nuanced insights into their transformative journeys and the broader sociocultural contexts shaping these experiences. This focused approach positions the study to make a substantial contribution to both theory and practice in the fields of community service, digital empowerment, and phenomenological inquiry.

Although numerous initiatives have been developed to improve digital literacy in rural communities, most existing approaches have relied on practical frameworks that focus primarily on measurable outcomes such as technological proficiency, program participation rates, and short-term effectiveness. These conventional strategies have contributed valuable insights into program efficiency but remain limited in uncovering the deeper, subjective dimensions of participants' experiences, particularly regarding how students perceive, interpret, and construct meaning from their involvement in community-based digital empowerment programs.

Previous studies employing quantitative assessments or surface-level qualitative inquiries have provided only partial understandings of the phenomenon. While they successfully evaluate tangible results, such as increased access to digital tools or improvements in technical skills, they often fail to capture the personal transformations, sociocultural negotiations, and emotional journeys experienced by students during the implementation process (Ardi & Putra, 2024; Widayanti et al.,

2020). Consequently, the essence of the lived experience within these programs including the evolving identity, motivation, and reflective growth of participants remains insufficiently explored.

This gap underscores the need for an alternative methodological lens capable of capturing the richness and complexity of participants' meaning-making processes. The interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) provides an appropriate framework to address this limitation by focusing on how individuals perceive, experience, and assign meaning to their engagement within broader sociocultural contexts. Through this lens, the study moves beyond reporting program outcomes and seeks to illuminate the transformative, personal, and contextual narratives that shape students' roles as facilitators of digital literacy in rural communities.

By adopting this perspective, the research addresses a critical void in the existing literature and responds to the growing need for a deeper, more holistic understanding of how community service initiatives influence participants at both individual and collective levels. The exploration of students' lived experiences not only contributes to advancing phenomenological inquiry but also offers practical insights for designing more sustainable and context-sensitive digital literacy programs in underserved areas.

Recent studies on community-based digital literacy programs have highlighted the growing importance of understanding participants' lived experiences within sociocultural contexts. Prior research has explored the effectiveness of such initiatives in improving technological competencies and promoting social inclusion, yet much of the literature has remained focused on measurable program outcomes rather than on the subjective meaning-making processes of participants (Hajad et al., 2025; Lardier et al., 2020). Phenomenological studies have demonstrated the potential to reveal deeper insights into how individuals interpret and internalize their experiences, especially when navigating new roles within community empowerment settings. However, there is still limited evidence on how university students facilitating digital literacy programs construct personal and collective meanings while engaging with rural communities. This study addresses this gap by focusing specifically on students' perceptions, challenges, and transformative experiences in a community service context.

To achieve this goal, the study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to investigate students' meaning-making processes during their participation in rural digital literacy initiatives (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). IPA was chosen because it allows for a deep exploration of participants' subjective experiences while considering the broader sociocultural environment influencing their engagement. By addressing the limitations identified in the Knowledge Gap, this approach moves beyond assessing program success to illuminate the personal growth, reflective practices, and identity transformations experienced by students. Through this lens, the study contributes both theoretically and practically by providing new insights into how digital literacy programs shape participants' understanding of themselves and their roles in empowering local communities.

This article is structured as follows. The Introduction provides an overview of the research context, including the background, knowledge gap, and study objectives (Mukhlis, 2025b; Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). The Method section describes the interpretative phenomenological design, participants, data collection, and analysis procedures used in this study. The Results section presents the main themes emerging from participants' narratives, supported by direct quotations that illustrate their experiences. The Discussion integrates the findings with existing literature, highlighting theoretical implications, practical contributions, and directions for future research. Finally, the Conclusion summarizes the study's key contributions and offers recommendations for sustaining digital literacy empowerment in rural communities.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study adopted an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of university students involved in a community-based digital literacy empowerment

program in rural areas (Iosifides, 2016; Longhofer et al., 2012). Phenomenology was selected as the research design because it enables a deeper understanding of participants' subjective meanings and provides insight into the essence of their experiences within a specific social context. The interpretative phenomenological framework was applied to capture not only descriptive accounts of participants' experiences but also the contextual meanings constructed through their reflections and interactions. This approach allowed the study to focus on the interpretive process by which participants make sense of their lived experiences while highlighting personal, cultural, and social dimensions relevant to the phenomenon.

Participants

Participants consisted of eight undergraduate students (four males and four females) aged between 20 and 23 years, all of whom actively participated in the community-based digital literacy program. A purposive sampling strategy was applied to select individuals who possessed direct involvement and experiential relevance to the phenomenon under investigation (Carreiras & Castro, 2012). Inclusion criteria required that participants (1) had completed at least one semester of community service, (2) were involved in providing digital literacy training to rural communities, and (3) were willing to share their personal reflections openly. Individuals without direct involvement in the program or those unwilling to participate voluntarily were excluded.

This selection ensured that participants had sufficient experience to articulate meaningful insights regarding the challenges, strategies, and personal transformations associated with the program. Basic demographic characteristics were documented to provide contextual understanding, while participants' identities were anonymized to maintain confidentiality.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews designed to elicit participants' narratives regarding their experiences and reflections (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). An interview guide was developed to ensure flexibility in exploring emerging themes while maintaining consistency across sessions. Each interview lasted between 45 and 70 minutes and was conducted in a quiet, comfortable setting chosen by the participants to foster openness and reduce social pressure.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face and recorded with participants' consent. Open-ended questions were used to encourage rich, detailed responses, enabling participants to describe their thoughts, emotions, and interpretations of their roles in facilitating digital literacy. Observational notes were also taken to capture nonverbal cues and contextual dynamics during the interviews.

All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim immediately after each session to preserve participants' original expressions and ensure data integrity. Transcriptions were checked against recordings to maintain accuracy.

Data Analysis

An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was applied to explore the meaning-making processes underlying participants' experiences (Lutz & Knox, 2014). Data analysis followed a systematic, iterative procedure:

- **Immersion in the Data** Interview transcripts were read repeatedly to gain familiarity with participants' narratives and overall meaning structures.
- **Identification of Significant Statements** Meaningful segments were highlighted, representing participants' reflections and perceptions related to the phenomenon.
- **Development of Emerging Themes** Significant statements were clustered into conceptual themes, which reflected commonalities and divergences in participants' experiences.
- **Cross-Case Analysis** Themes were compared across participants to identify shared patterns and unique individual insights.
- **Synthesis of Essential Meanings** Core themes were synthesized into an interpretive framework that revealed the essence of the phenomenon.

NVivo 14 software was utilized to assist with data organization and coding, while the interpretative process remained researcher-driven to ensure contextual sensitivity. This approach enabled the derivation of rich thematic structures that represent participants' subjective understandings and social realities.

RESULTS

Navigating the Transition from Learner to Community Educator

Participants described a significant shift in identity as they moved from being students to becoming agents of change within rural communities. This transition was marked by initial anxiety, self-doubt, and uncertainty regarding their role as digital literacy facilitators. However, they also expressed a growing sense of responsibility and empowerment as the program progressed.

“At first, I doubted myself. I wasn't sure if I could teach them about technology. But when I saw how eager the villagers were to learn, I realized that I had to push my limits and take charge.” (P3)

This transformation reflects a deeper meaning-making process where students reconstructed their self-concept and developed a stronger professional identity. Participants reported that taking responsibility for others' learning heightened their motivation to master digital tools and created a sense of personal fulfillment.

Overcoming Sociocultural Barriers in Rural Engagement

Students highlighted that facilitating digital literacy in rural contexts involved navigating sociocultural resistance and generational gaps. Elderly participants, in particular, expressed skepticism towards technology, which initially created tension and slowed the learning process.

“Some of the older villagers said, ‘Why should we learn this? It's useless for us.’ I had to explain patiently, showing them step by step how it could help their business and communication.” (P6)

Despite these challenges, participants developed culturally sensitive teaching strategies, such as using local dialects and contextualizing examples relevant to villagers' daily lives. This adaptive approach fostered trust and improved engagement, demonstrating how students learned to integrate social empathy with technological instruction.

Experiencing Personal Growth Through Reflective Practice

Another central finding concerns the personal transformation experienced by students through reflective engagement with their roles. Participants described how the program deepened their sense of purpose, resilience, and adaptability when dealing with unexpected problems, such as limited infrastructure and scarce resources.

“There was one day when the electricity went out during our training. I panicked at first, but then I thought of alternatives—we used printed screenshots to explain the steps. It made me realize I'm more resourceful than I thought.” (P2)

This reflective process allowed participants to recognize their capacity for problem-solving and creativity. More importantly, students reported an increased awareness of social inequality and the importance of equitable access to digital tools.

Personal Growth Through Reflection



Building Sustainable Digital Literacy Practices

Students emphasized their commitment to creating a lasting impact beyond the program's immediate objectives. They designed continuity strategies by training local youth as peer educators, developing step-by-step digital manuals, and creating WhatsApp groups to provide ongoing support.

“We didn't want the program to end when we left. That's why we taught several local youths to continue the sessions and help others in their village.” (P8)

This theme illustrates how students' engagement evolved from a short-term community service activity into a broader sustainable empowerment initiative, reflecting a shift from individual learning to collective community transformation.

DISCUSSION

Contribution of Findings to the Research Question

The findings provide rich insights into how students construct meaning from their engagement in digital literacy initiatives within rural communities (Boender, 2021; Dichter et al., 2021). Students' narratives indicate that their involvement extended beyond acquiring and transferring technical knowledge; it fostered personal growth, reflective learning, and enhanced social empathy. The results show that facilitating digital literacy required students to navigate multiple layers of experience balancing their academic identity as learners with their emerging roles as educators, mentors, and agents of change.

By developing adaptive teaching strategies and collaborating closely with community members, students discovered new dimensions of responsibility and resilience (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023; Mukhlis et al., 2024). These findings directly answer the central research question by highlighting the transformative nature of participation, where students not only empowered local communities but also redefined their sense of self, purpose, and belonging. Importantly, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the mutual learning process between students and rural residents, illustrating that community service can create reciprocal benefits that extend far beyond program objectives.

Relationship to Previous Literature and Theoretical Frameworks

The findings align with existing literature emphasizing the importance of experiential learning and subjective meaning-making in community-based initiatives, who identified students' evolving identities during empowerment programs, this study confirms that community service fosters personal

transformation through reflective practices and active engagement (Kotturi et al., 2024; Shifera et al., 2021). However, unlike earlier studies that primarily evaluated program outcomes using quantitative measures, this research uncovers the intricate emotional, cultural, and identity-related processes underpinning students' experiences.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings resonate with interpretative phenomenology, which emphasizes understanding how individuals perceive, interpret, and assign meaning to their lived experiences. The students' narratives illustrate the interpretive process described by Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology, where meaning is co-constructed through interactions with others and within sociocultural contexts. By revealing these nuanced insights, the study advances current understanding by integrating technological empowerment with personal and social transformation, thereby filling an essential gap in prior research on community-based digital literacy programs.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study hold significant theoretical, practical, and sociocultural implications within the context of community-based digital literacy initiatives (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). From a theoretical standpoint, the study expands phenomenological understanding by illustrating how students' meaning-making processes are deeply connected to identity reconstruction, emotional adaptation, and social responsibility. Practically, the results highlight the necessity of integrating experiential learning strategies into university-based community service programs to foster students' reflective capacities and enhance their adaptability when addressing sociocultural barriers.

At the sociocultural level, the findings emphasize the importance of context-sensitive approaches in facilitating digital empowerment within rural communities. Students' ability to modify teaching methods, employ local languages, and co-develop sustainable learning mechanisms underscores the value of culturally grounded program designs. Beyond the immediate study context, these insights are applicable to broader populations engaged in similar initiatives, suggesting that empowering students as facilitators can produce mutually beneficial impacts—enhancing community development while simultaneously shaping students' professional and personal growth trajectories.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the sample size was relatively small, consisting of eight participants, which restricts the extent to which results can be generalized beyond similar academic and sociocultural contexts (Ching Siang et al., 2019; Gil & Johnson, 2024). Second, the study was conducted within a specific rural setting where cultural norms, community expectations, and technological infrastructures may differ significantly from other regions, limiting broader applicability.

Additionally, the use of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), while well-suited for capturing subjective meanings, inherently prioritizes depth over breadth (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). This approach provides rich insights into individual experiences but does not aim to represent population-wide perspectives. Acknowledging these limitations, future research should be cautious when applying these findings to larger or different community contexts and should consider complementing phenomenological inquiries with comparative or mixed-methods designs for a more comprehensive understanding.

Future Research Directions

Building on the current findings, future research could explore students' experiences across diverse sociocultural contexts to identify how cultural variations influence digital literacy facilitation and meaning-making processes (Padilla et al., 2023; Pentz et al., 2019). Comparative studies involving different universities, geographic regions, or community service models could enhance understanding of the structural and cultural factors shaping program effectiveness.

Furthermore, longitudinal investigations are recommended to examine the sustained impact of students' participation in digital empowerment initiatives, focusing on both community outcomes and

students' long-term personal and professional development (Hirschak et al., 2023; Osborne et al., 2020). Integrating phenomenological inquiry with action research frameworks may also strengthen collaborative approaches between academic institutions and local communities, leading to context-driven, sustainable digital literacy solutions. These directions would not only enrich phenomenological scholarship but also provide actionable insights for policymakers, educators, and program designers working to reduce digital inequalities in rural areas.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of university students participating in a community-based digital literacy empowerment program in rural areas, addressing the research problem of understanding how students construct meaning from their engagement. The findings revealed that students experienced significant personal growth, identity transformation, and enhanced social empathy while navigating challenges related to sociocultural dynamics and technological barriers. By adopting an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA), the study provided deeper insights into the subjective meaning-making processes that have been largely overlooked in previous research. These results contribute to both theory and practice by highlighting the reciprocal benefits of community service programs, where students empower local communities while simultaneously developing their own professional and personal competencies. The study also addresses methodological gaps by demonstrating the value of phenomenology in capturing the richness and complexity of human experiences within digital literacy initiatives.

Beyond these contributions, the study offers sharper implications for practice and policy. Higher education institutions should integrate structured reflection and mentorship into community engagement programs to maximize students' identity and skill development. Policymakers and local governments can collaborate with universities to scale digital literacy initiatives by providing infrastructure support, training modules, and incentives for sustainable community partnerships. For rural communities, the findings underscore the importance of co-creation, suggesting that programs should be designed with active involvement of local stakeholders to ensure cultural relevance and long-term adoption.

Future research should not only extend to different sociocultural contexts but also evaluate policy outcomes and program effectiveness over time, enabling evidence-based strategies that strengthen both student learning and community empowerment.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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