

Learning Arnis Beyond Competition: Experiences of Student Practitioners

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Abstract: This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of student practitioners learning Arnis within Physical Education classes, focusing on non-competitive aspects, cultural appreciation, personal development, and intrinsic motivation. Employing a qualitative phenomenological research design, data were gathered through semi-structured individual interviews with twelve (12) college students—comprising eight males and four females enrolled in physical education courses. The interview transcripts were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework, which yielded five major themes: (1) Meaningful Benefits of Arnis Beyond Competition, highlighting physical fitness, self-defense, discipline, stress relief, and character development alongside the motivational role of tournaments; (2) Holistic Personal and Social Development Through Arnis, emphasizing discipline, respect, confidence, teamwork, and leadership; (3) Arnis as a Medium for Filipino Cultural Identity and Heritage, focusing on the connection to national history, traditions, and patriotism; (4) Experiential and Engaging Arnis Learning, pointing to hands-on activities such as partner drills, sparring, and Anyo; and (5) Teacher Knowledge and Instructional Support, stressing the importance of proper technique, feedback, and guidance. The findings indicate that while competitions can provide additional motivation, Arnis offers substantial intrinsic value through holistic growth, social connection, and cultural preservation. The study recommends that Physical Education instructors promote Arnis as a lifelong practice, utilize experiential learning strategies, and integrate cultural heritage into the curriculum.

Keywords: Arnis, Filipino martial arts, lived experiences, cultural identity, physical education, qualitative research

1. Introduction

Traditional martial arts in the Philippines trace back to ancient forms of personal and communal defense. Developed over centuries by Filipino ancestors, these systems have been kept alive through families and schools. They have also been used to teach practical fighting skills but also served as ways to embody Filipino values and ways of life. (Martin & Santos, 2019). Within this tradition, Arnis has been formally recognized as the country's official national martial art and sport. More than a method of combat, it embodies the historical experiences, identity, discipline, and resilience of the Filipino people. As a component of the Physical Education curriculum, its practice is intended to do more than cultivate physical fitness and technical proficiency; it also fosters among students an appreciation of the nation's cultural heritage. Although competitive performance often occupies a prominent place in instructional practice, the cultural, personal, and educational dimensions of Arnis remain comparatively underexplored, offering a promising direction for further pedagogical and scholarly inquiry. (Martin & Santos, 2019)

The integration of Arnis into Physical Education curricula has primarily emphasized physical conditioning, technical proficiency, and competitive achievement (Santos et al., 2022). Historically, physical education programs have prioritized globally recognized sports over indigenous practices, reducing traditional martial arts to competitive activities instead of holistic learning experiences (Peralta, 2025). However, practitioners often experience Arnis beyond tournaments, discovering its role in building personal resilience, discipline, respect, community relationships, and cultural identity (Malmo, 2013).

Despite its recognition under national legislation, student participation in Arnis remains characterized by only moderate levels of physical competence and limited appreciation of its cultural significance (Santos et al., 2022). This is relevant to the broader literature on Filipino college students, where motivation has been identified as an important factor associated with physical-activity participation (Martin et al., 2016). Many students perceive Arnis merely as a course requirement rather than a lifelong practice that promotes wellness, identity formation, and patriotism (Martin & Santos, 2019). This disconnect highlights the need to examine how learners experience Arnis beyond competitive settings and identify instructional approaches that foster meaningful and culturally responsive learning (Fuller & Lloyd, 2020; Tressie et al., 2019).

Existing studies on Arnis predominantly focus on competitive performance, technical skill development, and physical fitness outcomes. Limited research has explored how student practitioners perceive Arnis beyond competition, particularly in relation to cultural appreciation, personal development, and intrinsic motivation. Furthermore, there is insufficient evidence regarding instructional approaches that promote meaningful learning experiences and encourage lifelong engagement with Arnis. Addressing these gaps will contribute to improving Physical Education instruction while supporting the preservation and promotion of Filipino cultural heritage.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how student practitioners view learning Arnis as separate from competition. It will also determine Arnis's effectiveness in helping students learn to appreciate Filipino culture and heritage. Lastly, this study will look for learning techniques that will provide students with intrinsic value in learning. With that said, this research will illustrate how students learn Arnis and how it allows them to express their individuality and become the best versions of themselves by heightening their sense of cultural identity, discipline, respect, and patriotism. Not only will this study determine ways on how to properly teach Arnis but it can also give recommendations based on the researchers' conclusions. This study's recommendations are designed to help Physical Education teachers, relevant practitioners, and institutions enhance their work in preserving Filipino culture.

2. Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore and understand the lived experiences of student practitioners learning Arnis in Physical Education classes. Phenomenology seeks to examine how individuals perceive, interpret, and make meaning of their experiences regarding a specific phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to capture students' personal experiences and perceptions of learning Arnis beyond competitive settings, including their appreciation of Filipino culture and heritage, personal development, and intrinsic motivation for sustained engagement.

Participants & Sampling

The participants consisted of thirteen (12) college students currently enrolled in Physical Education courses at a higher education institution in the Philippines. The sample included eight (8) male students and four (4) female students. Purposive sampling was utilized to select participants who could provide rich and relevant information regarding their experiences of learning Arnis in Physical Education classes. The inclusion criteria required participants to be currently enrolled in PE courses that include Arnis instruction, to have completed at least one Arnis unit, and to be willing to share their experiences related to learning Arnis, competition, cultural appreciation, and personal development.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews. An interview guide containing open-ended questions was developed to explore participants' experiences related to learning Arnis, including their perceptions of competitive and non-competitive aspects of the practice, appreciation of Filipino culture, personal growth, discipline, and intrinsic motivation. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy in data collection. Follow-up probing questions were used when necessary to obtain deeper insights and clarify responses.

Data Analysis

The study employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework:

1. Familiarization with the data
2. Generation of initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

Interview transcripts were repeatedly reviewed to identify meaningful patterns and recurring concepts. Codes were grouped into categories and eventually organized into overarching themes that represented the participants' lived experiences of learning Arnis.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to established ethical principles for research involving human participants. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality of responses, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Written informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Participant anonymity was protected through the use of pseudonyms and participant codes (e.g., P1, P2). All interview recordings and transcripts were securely stored and accessed only by the researchers. The study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards for educational research and respected the dignity, privacy, and welfare of all participants.

3. Results & Discussion

Theme 1: Meaningful Benefits of Arnis beyond Competition

The participants viewed Arnis as still worth learning even without competition because of the physical fitness, self-defense, discipline, stress relief, confidence, and character that they gained. A few students explained that Arnis can always be practiced for fun or as a way of life without competitions.

"Just because there is no competition does not mean that training should stop. I see it as a lifestyle." -P5

"Yes, because it is my passion regardless of whether there is competition or not." -P2

"It helps with health and provides an opportunity to make new friends or build relationships with people I met during training." -P3

Taken together, these responses imply that students may believe Arnis is useful even outside of a tournament setting. Students see Arnis not only as a sport, but also as a form of exercise, a way to make friends, a stress reliever, and a useful life skill that can help students defend themselves. This finding is consistent with Santos et al. (2022), who found that Arnis participation can contribute to students' perceived physical competence and cultural appreciation of the martial art. Thus, it may help students continue participating if they are taught about the benefits of Arnis that do not pertain to competition (Santos et al., 2022).

Although students recognized these benefits beyond competition, some respondents also emphasized that competition can influence their motivation and interest. Competition was associated with opportunities, recognition, awards, and motivation to improve.

"I see it as a motivation when competition comes, and I will do better when the competition starts." -P2

"I think many people would not be interested in Arnis if there were no competitions." -P6

"When I started Arnis, I received awards and medals." -P6

These responses show that competition can serve as an additional source of motivation and recognition for some students. Competition gives students something concrete to train for and be recognized for, which may encourage them to improve their skills and continue training. However, other participants indicated that they would continue training even without competitions. This is supported by Baguhin (2024), who found that Filipino Arnisadors were motivated by several factors, with enjoyment, mastery, and physical condition emerging as the most salient motives, while competition/ego was among the least influential motives. These findings suggest that although competition may encourage participation for some students, continued engagement in Arnis can also be sustained through intrinsic factors such as enjoyment, skill development, and physical improvement.

Theme 2: Holistic Personal and Social Development Through Arnis

The respondents agreed that Arnis training has taught them discipline, respect, confidence, and character. They believed that these qualities should be developed through constant training and not just as technicalities for competing. In addition to personal growth, participants also described Arnis as a means of social growth. This included forming relationships, working as a team, and learning leadership skills. Training gives students time to spend with teammates, coaches, and other martial artists.

"Discipline, character development, and camaraderie with other players." -P1

"It shaped me as a whole by developing discipline, integrity, and respect." -P2

"You cannot become stronger without discipline. You must learn discipline first before developing other Arnis skills." -P5

"I meet more people and learn more things." -P5

"You learn how to work with your teammates, and if you become a team leader, you also learn how to lead and discipline a team." -P8

Based on these responses, it can be concluded that Arnis promotes holistic development. Trainees feel that discipline allows them to learn and enhance their skills. Respect and integrity are learned through interactions with their coaches, training partners, and fellow students. Lastly, confidence is developed through continuous practice and through recognizing their own skills and abilities as students. These responses also indicate that Arnis allows students to learn and interact with others around them. Through the sport, students develop social skills by communicating and building relationships with their teammates and training partners. Students also work together during training, allowing them to develop cooperation, teamwork, mutual respect, and leadership. This finding is consistent with Peralta (2025), who found that Arnis education promotes students' confidence, discipline, personal growth, social connections, and holistic development.

Theme 3: Arnis as a Medium for Filipino Cultural Identity and Heritage

The Participants also highlighted how Arnis served as something deeper than physical exercise, discussing how it relates to Filipino history, culture, and ancestors. By learning Arnis, participants discovered how the martial art is connected to the country's traditions and history. Participants also related their experiences in Arnis to their own identities as Filipinos. Practicing Arnis seemed to increase their respect for Filipino culture while fostering pride and patriotism.

"I realized that Arnis is not only a sport but also part of our history and Filipino culture." -P2

"I learned that our ancestors used Arnis to defend our own homeland." -P8

"I understood Arnis more as a Filipino because it became part of my identity. Being an Arnis practitioner has become part of who I am." -P5

"I became more proud of Filipino culture and wanted to support and continue our tradition." -P7

"It is my way of showing love for our own culture." -P4

Responses indicate that Arnis gives students hands-on experience with Filipino culture. Instead of being taught about Filipino culture only through history lessons, students learn about Filipino history and heritage through the practice of a Filipino martial art. This could help students value the history that they experience and practice. These answers also show that Arnis allows students to express their Filipino identity. By learning about the history of Arnis and practicing the martial art form, students are able to develop greater appreciation for Filipino culture. Results show that Filipino pride can be strengthened through Arnis because it allows students to participate in and help preserve a Filipino tradition rather than simply learning about it. This finding is consistent with Santos et al. (2022), who found that students demonstrated a moderately high level of cultural appreciation for Arnis, indicating that participation in the martial art can strengthen appreciation of its cultural heritage. Similarly, Lobo (2026) emphasized that integrating indigenous Arnis into higher education can support cultural identity and the preservation of cultural heritage.

Theme 4: Experiential and Engaging Arnis Learning

Participants suggested activities that enabled hands-on practice of Arnis instead of purely book knowledge. Common responses included fighting/activity drills, partner drills, basic attacks, Anyo, physical conditioning, demos, and street/applicable defense.

"I liked the partner drills, basic sparring, combat, and practical defense." -P4

"I enjoyed activities such as combat, the 12 basic strikes, and Anyo competitions." -P1

"I enjoy partner drills, basic striking and blocking exercises, and group activities. Mas interesting sila because you are actually interacting and practicing instead of just memorizing the movements." -P10

"Training is what I enjoy because it is the most important part." -P3

Answers like these indicate that participants enjoy Arnis more when they are learning by doing. Partner drills, sparring, combat, and Anyo are examples of activities that allow students to apply techniques, develop body coordination, and experience the practical nature of Arnis. This emphasis on active and participatory learning is also consistent with Santos (2019), who examined the use of role-play as an instructional approach in Physical Education and demonstrated the value of experiential activities in engaging students in learning. Varying the activities used during training may help maintain students' interest and encourage continued

participation. This is supported by Lobo (2025), whose Arnis training program incorporated sparring and Anyo sessions and demonstrated positive effects on the health-related physical fitness of collegiate students.

Theme 5: Teacher Knowledge and Instructional Support

The participants also emphasized the role of teachers and coaches in making Arnis meaningful. They highlighted the importance of proper technique, teacher knowledge, feedback, guidance, motivation, and encouragement.

"If they are going to teach Arnis, they should teach the proper form and be knowledgeable so that students can enjoy it." -P1

"They should know the basics because not all BPED students know what Arnis is and understand its importance." -P2

"We can conduct actual training such as group activities, demonstrations, and explanations of the history of Arnis to make learning more interesting." -P7

These results suggest that teacher knowledge and instructional support play an important role in maintaining students' interest in Arnis. Experienced and knowledgeable teachers can provide correct technical instruction while also emphasizing the cultural relevance of Arnis to students. The integration of demonstrations, activities, historical discussions, feedback, and encouragement may provide a more meaningful and enriching learning experience. This is supported by Dresser and Potane (2022), whose study found that appropriate activity selection, clear and useful illustrations, organized lessons, and motivating learning features contributed to students' learning experiences in Arnis. Their findings highlight the importance of appropriate instructional materials and teaching approaches in helping learners understand and engage with Arnis.

4. Conclusion

Results showed that students are able to find meaning in learning Arnis without competitions because they understand how beneficial Arnis is to them physically fit, capable of self-defense, disciplined, confident, stress-reliever, and life skill-enhancing. Although competitions can be used as additional means of motivating students and awarding them recognition for their skills and achievements, it is not the sole contributor to students' desire to continue Arnis. Students also found Arnis meaningful for the life and social skills they learn from regular training which includes discipline, respect, teamwork/camaraderie, confidence, and leadership. Students also noted that Arnis helped improve how they valued their Filipino history, culture, heritage, and identity. Students were also able to experience the application of the lessons they learn in activities such as partner drills, basic techniques, sparring, Anyo, and practical situation applications which made Arnis interesting. Moreover, students had supportive teachers who were knowledgeable in Arnis that were able to properly instruct them, provide them guidance, demonstrate techniques, give them feedback, and encourage them. The researchers were able to conclude that Arnis is not only a sport to be competed in but an enjoyable physical activity that also allows students to learn life, social, and cultural lessons on top of keeping them active which can make students want to continue practicing Arnis even outside of school and competitions.

5. Recommendations

Results suggest that Physical Education teachers should advocate that Arnis can be more than a sport or competitive activity. Discuss the importance of Arnis as a form of physical fitness, self-defense, discipline, gaining confidence, self-development, and learning about Filipino culture. Also, instructors should teach Arnis through learning activities that are learned through experience and enjoyable to the students. This can include drills with a partner, basic strikes and blocking, learning Anyo, participating in controlled sparring, group

activities, or role-play self-defense scenarios. Schools and Physical Education departments should focus on the cultural aspects of Arnis. They can do this by integrating history of the art, Filipino culture, traditions, heritage, and building Filipino cultural identity. In addition, teachers should ensure that qualified Arnis instructors provide demonstrations, clear instructions, feedback, and adequate supervision. Instructors should feel confident in their knowledge of the sport and motivate students to learn more about Arnis. Students should also be taught to value Arnis as a lifelong physical activity associated with Filipino culture and not just an activity they learn in PE or for competition. Future studies should include larger sample sizes and diverse populations when studying Arnis participation. Studies should also focus on long-term participation and what affects it, motivation to learn and continue with Arnis, cultural identity, instructional strategies, and how competition can help students' participation.

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