CHAPTER 4 ▰▰▰▰▰▰▰

Becoming engaged: Learners' experience in the online learning community (OLC)

4.1   Introduction

This chapter discusses information on the demographics of learners. Issues like age, economic sector, occupation, race and previous academic experience become important for successful online learning. Learner feedback is provided in the form of summaries from their interviews and important aspects are highlighted which relate to the success of the online learning community in this context. Learners provided important suggestions on the maintenance and redevelopment of this learning experience, but most importantly, valuable feedback on the nature of print-based delivery in the Unisa context.

4.2   Marketing and self-selection

First delivery

The course structure, teaching approach and assessment method had to be approved by the relevant bodies at Unisa. Marketing of the pilot deliveries could only start once Senate has given approval. This happened very close to the start of the academic semester and the strategy followed was to obtain e-mail addresses for second-year, third-year, honours and Master's learners from the Student System and to send out marketing material to them via e-mail (the course was initially restricted to learners who had completed two second-year modules of which one was a research module). It was thought that this would provide a means of reaching the potential audience with the necessary technology and connectivity. The marketing materials provided prospective learners with an overview of the course, information on registration and fee details and a very brief overview of the implications of studying in the online

learning community. Self-selection procedure statistics are summarised as follows:

Potential audience (e-mails)	404
Invalid e-mail addresses	114
Not interested	55
Interested	65
Qualifying	20
Registered	9

In their replies learners provided the following reasons why they were not interested:

- Interested, but did not meet the requirements.
- Course not relevant to their career path.
- Did not have sufficient Internet access.
- Current study workload would not allow time to take such a course.
- Prefered the print-based study mode.
- Professional workload did not allow time to take this course.

Of the learners who replied, only 20 qualified in terms of the restrictions on taking this module and Internet connectivity. Other study and professional commitments seemed to be the strongest reason for not taking this course. Selection notices were sent out via e-mail and 9 prospective learners decided to take up the challenge. The course started on time and staff succeeded in getting learners registered before the starting date.

Second delivery

During the first delivery of this pilot course several learners complained about workload and insufficient access to the Internet. For the second delivery, it was decided to do two levels of marketing in order to attract the right learners for this course. The first e-mail message would contain the introduction to the course and information on the OLC experience. Learners who showed interest

would receive a more detailed message regarding technical aspects, the workload and participation to enable them to decide finally whether they wished to enrol. The statistics regarding notification, reaction and selection are as follows:

Potential audience	448
Invalid addresses	158
Not interested	7
Interested	37
Qualifying (access to connectivity)	18
Registered	10

In their replies learners gave the following reasons why they were not interested:

- Other work commitments
- Other study commitments
- "Will stick to the traditional Unisa way, this looks a bit too time consuming and complicated."
- Had fulfilled all degree requirements
- No Internet access in private capacity
- "Many thanks but I think for now I'll stick to the course on paper!"

The 18 qualifying learners received another message (see below) which intended to repeat the information about the nature of this course so that issues like sufficient access and workload would not become obstacles during the course:

Hi prospective learners

I have already notified you that you made the selection list for this course.

Just a few reminders:

1. *The course in its entirety is presented online.*
2. *You will have to have Internet access on a daily basis.*
3. *You will have to contribute to discussions as often as possible, but a minimum of 4 times per week.*
4. *You will be involved in online group work that may demand more time at a specific point in this course – such group work is compulsory.*

> 5. *The course fee is R460 for the semester – we will start beginning August and terminate by the end of November – exact dates will follow.*
> 6. *There is no exam – you will be assessed continuously through online activities and written assignments – the course is all about communicating in writing.*
> 7. *This course has a heavier workload than most of Unisa's print-based courses – because there is no exam, and because we want to equip you with online communication skills and online group work skills.*
> 8. *There are no prescribed books.*
>
> *Please make sure that you understand the above clearly. If you are still willing to take this exciting course, please reply before 5 July 2001 by providing us with your details.*

Some learners never replied and eventually 10 of the learners were self-selected.

4.3   Which learners?

Learners may have work commitments and family commitments which may prevent them from attending face-to-face classes. Shaun, a programmer, had strong family commitments and he could only opt for some form of distance learning (interview, 15/11/2001). Diana, a systems developer and a South African living and working temporarily in Washington DC in the USA, did not want course packages and couldn't commit to face-to-face classes because she had to be mobile and ready to travel at any time (interview, 13/11/2001). For Elaine, owning her own business and having recently started her own marketing company, this course came at the right time and she only wanted to take this one course as she already had a degree in commerce (interview, 13/11/2001). Kobus, an aircraft technician who eventually discontinued his studies, was living in a boathouse on Hong Kong harbour. He worked very abnormal hours and couldn't attend classes to finish his degree which he had started with Unisa a number of years ago (Student Café forum contribution, 17/2/2001).

It is evident from the above that learners who take online courses may come from a variety of backgrounds. Sometimes these realities or circumstances prevent them from taking face-to-face courses. The reasons why they might decide to take an online course include:

- They may be constantly travelling the globe.
- Quality courses are not within reach.
- The online environment appeals to them (race, beauty, colour, disability, language accent, shyness, anxiety, etc, may be qualities that prevent them from enrolling for face-to-face courses).
- Freedom of and opportunity for speech
- Personal circumstances (family commitments)
- Adult and lifelong learning needs (it is not appropriate or convenient to go back to university)
- Work commitments (committing to particular times of the day may not be convenient)
- Training can be provided just-in-time.
- Online courses may be less expensive than face-to-face courses.

4.4   Demography of online groups

Certain learner characteristics are prevalent in the distance learning environment and in the online learning environment. The following section will address the learner demography of the two groups.

4.4.1   The age of learners

The following table provides the age groupings of the learners who eventually registered for the two deliveries of the pilot course:

Age groupings	1st delivery	2nd delivery
21 – 22	1	0
23 – 24	3	1
25 – 29	0	2
30 – 34	4	3
35 – 39	1	1
40 – 44	1	2

The majority of learners were between 30 and 44 years of age (statistics obtained from the Bureau for Management Information on 12/12/2001). The age of learners is an important factor when a learning experience is developed as they need to be engaged as adults. Lewis in White (2000: 34) asks for the andragogical approach which is adult-centred. For him the virtual medium requires learner discipline that presumes a high level of maturity and a facilitator approach that presumes he or she is leading adults.

4.4.2   Economic sector

As the average age was relatively high, it was accepted that most learners were economically active. Their diverse experience and knowledge was an important part of successful learning in a community. The following table provides information on the economic sectors of learners:

Economic sector	1st delivery	2nd delivery
Mining	0	2
Manufacturing	0	1
Transport and public utilities	1	0
Business and related services	1	0
Entertainment services	0	1
Secondary education sector	1	1
Tertiary education sector	2	1
Public administration	1	0
Unknown	4	3

The following table provides information on the occupations and careers of learners (statistics obtained from the Bureau for Management Information on 12/12/2001):

Occupation	1st delivery	2nd delivery
Computer specialist	0	1
Personnel officer	0	1
Lecturer	2	1
Technician	1	0
Manager/administrator	0	2
Clerical and related	1	1
Member of the military	1	0
Fulltime learner at Unisa	1	1
Fulltime learner elsewhere	1	0
Unknown	2	2
Unemployed	1	0

It is understandable that learners tended to come from work environments such as human resources, higher education, management and administration as this is a course offered by the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences. Admission restrictions were removed for the second delivery and learners from more diverse backgrounds could apply. The diverse backgrounds and experience of learners formed a rich resource which could be exploited in the community and collaborative environment of the course. Most learners on the pilot course were in their thirties and over, and economically active. This would have positively influenced their ability to study online as levels of access to connectivity might have been higher. Learners which are not economically active may not have regular access to the Internet.

4.4.3   Diversity

In the SA context race and by implication cultural differences are important in the learning environment, the recent political changes not withstanding. The following table provides information on the race of the two groups of learners (statistics obtained from the Bureau for Management Information on 12/12/2001):

Race	1st delivery	2nd delivery
Black	4	1
Coloured	1	1
Asian	1	1
White	4	7

According to Kearsley online learning is as much a social activity as an personal one (Kearsley, 2000: 65).The advantage of studying online in this context is that alienating factors such as colour and other physical differences, or even disabilities, are not relevant as they are not visible. In fact it could be said that the priority for any online learning community, especially in the South Africa context, should be to have a diverse group of learners which reflects the ideal society. With these alienating factors removed, such a learning experience can still be complex, because, in order to accommodate a diverse group of learners, one has to be aware of cultural differences which dictate the nature of interaction with others. This reality will demand cultural sensitivity and tolerance from participants.

The online environment is, therefore, full of ambiguity and facilitators should understand that meaning is created in interaction among people and it includes all human qualities, attitudes, feelings and emotions (White, 2000: 2).
The online environment, hiding many personal aspects of people as it does, is a very complex environment. As a result, good people skills are essential. The behaviour demanded from participants may be very different from that which prevails in a face-to-face or independent correspondence experience. For this reason and because of the collaborative environment of the pilot course, social skills were regarded as very important.

Although it is not related to issues of race or religion, Gwen admitted (interview, 23/06/2001) that she, without intent, took on a different personality because she was allowed to speak freely. Indeed her performance was interpreted by Magda (interview, 28/06/2001) as being aggressive. Magda felt the accommodating atmosphere of the course was negatively influenced by such behaviour. In general, however, the diversity of the two groups did not present a problem for the facilitator of this course.

4.4.4   Previous studies

As one of the objectives of this project was to determine the success of the online learning community, and to invite comments from the learners regarding print-based study, it was essential that most learners had past distance learning experience at Unisa. The following table presents statistics on previous enrolments (statistics obtained from the Bureau for Management Information on 12/12/2001):

Institution	1st delivery	2nd delivery
Unisa	8	7
RAU (SA)	0	1
UWC (SA)	1	0
Foreign	0	1
Not applicable	1	0

The majority of learners had previously studied at Unisa, and learner feedback on past print-based experience promised to be an important factor in change and development of new practices and systems.

4.5   A successful learner experience

This section discusses the learners' experience, and the success of the online learning community as a learning environment. Learners' stories are presented in summary form as background information and the primary source of data on their experience. Their feedback is then discussed in terms of the criteria for successful online learning. Learners also had strong opinions regarding their past print-based experience which is relevant to this study as the pilot course was delivered against a unique print-based culture.

4.5.1   The learners' stories

Learners' stories may be forgotten in a mass distance education environment. Course evaluation questionnaires are sent out quite often, but they seldom provide opportunity for learners to report on the quality of teaching – provided

they get the opportunity to know their teachers. The learning person and his or her learning experience in total are seldom accounted for. The summaries were made from the notes taken during the interviews with individual learners. The following table presents the groups of learners and the order in which the summaries are presented:

1st delivery	2nd delivery
Nomsa	Elaine
Esther	Diana
Gwen	Gay
Neville	Jenny
Lea	Mary
Jolene	Shane
Magda	Zeta
Vanessa	Arney
	Alex

- **Nomsa (first delivery, interview on 23/06/2001)**

Nomsa was a lecturer at Unisa who completed all her previous studies at a face-to-face institution and had little distance learning experience. For her the OLC was an exciting environment to learn in. It was a lot of work though and she had to work continuously not to fall behind. One has to be motivated and be the first to contribute. She scanned through the considerable amount of interesting and relevant content provided in order to successfully take part in the course forums where she learned a lot.

She only had access to the Internet from work and this caused her to struggle to fit all the activities into her schedule. As an independent correspondence learner one works alone and cannot test one's thoughts. In the beginning she was a bit hesitant to take part in the discussion forums and say her say. But the group became like a live study group with equal participation. A group spirit developed in the pleasant atmosphere. In the OLC she was never alone and could test her thoughts with other learners. She liked the continuous assessment much more than the old examination model. The assignments were fine as she

could choose her own topics. However, there wasn't enough time to do the collaborative assignment properly. Sometimes more guidance was needed in the forums from the facilitator. Facilitation might have been difficult and time consuming as learners needed a lot of support. She wasn't sure that many Unisa lecturers would be prepared to do this for so few learners.

Learners would have to make sure why they enrolled for this type of course. It would appear as if some learners might not have the right attitude for this type of course. They complained about the workload and the amount of participation ('talking') they had to engage in. But she enjoyed the writing – it was fun for her. Unfortunately some Unisa learners didn't have much opportunity to practice their writing as they did not have to submit assignments anymore. Nevertheless, she enjoyed playing with the technology. The chatroom was the major technological problem for her because it was out of order for some time.

- **Esther (first delivery, interview on 23/06/2001)**

Esther was an academic assistant at Unisa and was continuing her studies with Unisa. The online course environment was very informal and new to her. She enjoyed this experience, but she preferred print-based delivery as it was more predictable. This online course had a heavy and continuous workload. She was overwhelmed and she found it painful to adapt. She needed more time to do the work. She did not have the right attitude from the beginning. There was a lot of emphasis on creativity and this also took more effort than expected as she had to come up with ideas and had to integrate them well into her argument.

Too many activities were scheduled at the same time and she had trouble keeping up. Preparing the group assignment was difficult as she had trouble accommodating the feedback from other learners – human contact might have made a difference. In general she thought that criteria for assignments should be better explained and she felt that too much emphasis was put on theory. She

did not know who the facilitator was as he was not visible enough. This caused too much information to be generated by overly long messages. She got bored with this – in print this is not possible. But then other learners did not take part sufficiently and this made it difficult. Overall she experienced the course environment as friendly and comments of others could be taken in good spirit. Some learners, who had known one another before the course, became better friends outside as a result.

In spite of the technical problems, the chatroom was a very enjoyable experience. Starting off with the chatroom might have improved communication later on in the course.

- **Gwen (first delivery, interview on 23/06/2001)**

Gwen was a lecturer at Unisa who had obtained all her qualifications through Unisa's print-based delivery. For her this online course was a 'beautiful' course, but it was time consuming as she had to work continuously and come up with ideas.

She took the opportunity to be straightforward in the online environment – she is not straightforward enough in real life. But she felt she might have overdone it as there was always the possibility that she could be misinterpreted. This possibility did not exist in print. The course as such left her thinking about a lot of personal issues. When people questioned her ideas, the questioning of her own beliefs started. This was a very unsettling environment for her ideas. The communicative environment enabled her to form pictures of the participants. However, she appreciated the 'human elements' in the OLC. She could create an online personality while others still respected her. Some learners could perceive this personality as aggressive. She felt that the course was not that productive because quiet people on the course 'robbed' others by not providing their opinions and experience. Compared to the repetition of content in print

delivery, here she was able to question the opinions even of the lecturer. She had the opportunity of voicing her own ideas with immediate response.

She would have liked to know how she compared to other learners in terms of grades. Regarding the tight schedule, she needed the system to remind her as she missed one discussion.

The social part of the learning experience needed to pay attention to issues like learners' birthdays. She had also suffered a personal trauma when her husband was hijacked during the time of the course. It would have helped her if it could have been addressed in the group environment.

Facilitation should be done fairly. One learner was commended for good work online ('Well-done…') and then she felt she couldn't criticise or question the learner's opinions anymore. She thought that the facilitator was not visible enough. Being a lecturer herself, she was of the opinion that print-based delivery could cause one to become fixated in practice. One did not critically assess one's teaching practice sufficiently.

A more stable chatroom could be a pleasant experience, but it could not record and administer content very well. She enjoyed the discussion forums as various interesting concepts were analysed. She had to do research before making a comment and then it would be contested. In general, she felt that the forums should be properly directed and structured in order to prevent too much irrelevant information from being included.

- **Neville (first delivery, interview on 23/6/01)**

Neville was completing his commerce degree through Unisa at the time of taking this course. This well-designed and presented course was a very positive experience for him. He was challenged by a lot more work and research

compared to other print-based courses he had done. He accepted this as there was no venue-linked examination.

He experienced a communication breakdown with the groupwork organisation and activities. Some roles were not clear and he believed this affected his mark. It was also a challenge to coordinate the groupwork via e-mail. The course was definitely more learner-centred and enabled learner interpretation. Learners' own experience was relevant. He felt more empowered in this environment. The activities and discussion led to deep exploration of topics and ideas whereas with print he simply had to study and write exams.
The assessment was more difficult than would be required in print delivery but there was more feedback. However, to optimise his performance and results, he would have liked to have received more precise feedback with his assignments. More input and directions from the facilitator would have helped with the discussions. The topics and arguments seemed to have broken down at times.

- **Lea (first delivery, interview on 28/06/2001)**

Lea, an academic assistant, had completed all her undergraduate work through Unisa. At first, the online experience was very pleasant for her. Compared to print-based delivery she could contribute much more from her own position and perspective. She did experience some sense of community and she felt she did belong somewhere. But later she felt she had to communicate and participate, and this pressure eventually affected her performance on the course. The immediacy that was part of the learning experience put a lot of pressure on the participant. In print the learner had independence of time and place and could do things at his or her own convenience. The workload on this course was too great.

The written assignments were very difficult compared to print study. There was not enough information provided in advance regarding what was expected. Proper examples of what was expected, and sufficient feedback, would have

helped. The theoretical requirements for assignments were too strongly assessed. It was as if 'lecturers' wanted to see academic content in the assignments, and not necessarily her views and interpretation. She felt more comfortable expressing herself online than in written assignments independently.

She felt that the contributions in the discussion forums were too long and sometimes difficult to understand. According to her the facilitator did perform his task up to standard. She did not expect much because she knew this was a new environment and task. The chatroom was a very interesting technology and she enjoyed working with it.

- **Jolene (first delivery, interview on 28/06/2001)**

Jolene was completing her second year of commerce studies through Unisa. The course was a great experience, but a lot of hard work. It was beneficial as it broadened her knowledge substantially. She was proud that she did so much research herself (she had to read a lot on the Internet) for assignments and forum discussions. She had grown considerably as a person and as a learner. She had come to see what was happening in the world in a different light.

This was in contrast to print-based courses where she was struggling through guides and text books just in order to be equipped to write the examination. Print was so much easier - it was just about an exam. She did not take in much when she studied this way, because once she had written the examination, she tended to forget everything. In this environment when she wanted to contribute she needed to know what she was talking about. She became more critical about her own input, her assignment work and about what others had to say. In the print-based environment her opinions did not matter. In the online course environment her opinion was regarded as important and it did count for the assignments also. Print-based work was much more about theory only.

She enjoyed being part of the group and staff members were close by to assist. The groupwork activity and the social contact via e-mail she engaged in assisted with feeling part of the group and it made it easier for her to cope. In the beginning she was very intimidated by more senior learners. But she gradually became more confident as she learned that she could voice her opinions on an equal footing. She was in a more empowered position and became more committed to her studies. The feedback on assignments was very encouraging. Right from the first assignment she knew what was wrong and she could address the shortcomings. Layout and style requirements helped her to know how to write properly. In the print-based environment she never did write a lot - getting good at writing was very important and essential to successful online learning.

- **Magda (first delivery, interview on 28/06/01)**

Magda had obtained her previous qualifications through face-to-face tuition. The workload of this course was a problem for her as a working learner. She had to do more on this course than she did for her other face-to-face courses. It was a different but very good experience.

As the course progressed she felt that she became a member of the group and she knew she was not the only one who had to struggle. She suggested that a kind of certificate ceremony be held where she could meet the learners. She came to know their personalities online. She felt more able as she developed the self-confidence to voice her opinion. She had time to think and formulate her opinions properly. In face-to-face classes she would be afraid of what other people would think of her. At times some learners got a bit aggressive and this was not nice. It established a negative vibe in the course and such behaviour should be prevented.

- **Vanessa (first delivery, interview 28/06/2001)**

She was a lecturer at Unisa but had not been a learner at Unisa before. The online learning community experience was wonderful. The course was well-coordinated and there wasn't anything substantial that bothered her.

She liked the efficient contact and feedback with lecturers, and got the feeling that she was part of a group. The group dynamics were interesting, and she did learn to work in a group in the online environment. The scheduling of the group presentations positively influenced proper participation and commitment. The stronger learners kept the group together. However, the facilitator did not prevent "infoglut" and arguments were not sufficiently focussed. More guidelines and explanation should have guided participation initially. The external host disappeared for some time and she thought that they should stay connected to show that they were hosting or teaching online. Regarding technical aspects of the communication, the problems with the chatroom was a little disturbing.

She learned a lot and the course experience took her outside of the content boundaries through independent research and discussion. It was possible to do things from her own perspective. Her personal struggles and views became relevant in this learning experience. The limited scope of print-based content was not good in this regard. During the online experience she discovered what she could learn and not what the lecturer could teach. Feedback on the assignments and the mastering principal (submitting draft assignments) allowed her to learn from her mistakes.

So far she loved being a teacher and felt that there should be more emphasis on good teaching at universities. She liked being critical of her role as a teacher, and always wanted to get more out of her teaching. She was convinced that a delivery mode like the OLC could be a far more rewarding teaching experience than the current print-based exercise.

- **Elaine (second delivery, interview on 13/11/2001)**

This was the first year that she had enrolled at Unisa and was studying through distance learning. She preferred the social and community environment of the online course because of the daily participation and interaction with learners and support staff. There were people from diverse backgrounds together in a group which made it a very interesting experience. Everybody was able to express their personalities and get to know one another. She liked the asynchronous communication as she could contribute at three in the morning. Whenever she logged on there would be a contribution, and she could contribute and continue the discussion.

She could contribute her own opinions on the topics, and there was enormous freedom of speech and thought. Critical thinking preceded her contributions. After having read all contributions, she went offline and then back online when she had her thoughts well thought through. She knew she was going to be challenged and had to stand up for her viewpoint.

The workload was a bit heavier especially in the first few weeks, but later on she started coping. She appreciated the fact that the discussions stopped and that she had time to thoroughly prepare her assignment. She appreciated being warned before registration about the interactive nature of the course and the workload. The level of facilitation was acceptable as the conversations and discussions developed fairly well without much need for redirection. The discussions were allowed to go on quite far in a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere.

The criteria provided for the assignments were of assistance, but she was however not satisfied with the feedback on the first mastery assignment. She received only a few words of feedback: "The assignment is fine, but put more theory in the beginning." There might have been too much accent on theory and it could only form the basis of her viewpoints. She appreciated being provided with the schedule — she could do better time management and

planning. She planned her studies accordingly. The communication on the course was very satisfactory. She found Unisa very inaccessible and distant when she investigated the possibility of enrolling at Unisa. With this course she could just send an e-mail and got an answer within a couple of hours. She did not experience any technical problems and found the course site very easy to navigate.

She would love to take more of her courses in the online mode. People were happy in this environment— they were allowed to talk and say their say. She enjoyed it very much. There was a relaxed atmosphere and everything contributed to a desire to learn and to learn from people with diverse backgrounds.

- **Diana (second delivery, interview on 13/11/2001)**

She took six other correspondence modules with this one. In spite of the heavy workload, she enjoyed this online module very much. It gave her the opportunity to integrate her own information, experience and research. With certain print-based modules she felt like her only responsibility was to rewrite the text book in the exam. With this module she had to go online regularly and contribute her own thoughts. She could participate when she wanted to.

She had the opportunity to think and formulate her own opinion. In real life she had to do this too – thinking and arguing before taking a decision. The exams were quite different from this. They did not really assess what she could do — it couldn't get to 'know her as a person'. The social nature of the online course allowed her to make friends and she could learn from them by sharing opinions. She was worried that the course staff would forget to greet the learners and say goodbye before the course ended on 25 November. She didn't want the group to just fade away without this happening.

She would have liked the group to be a bit bigger. In her group there were only two or three strong participants and the rest were just taking an easy ride. The lecturer (facilitator) was not active enough in the discussions and arguments that learners had. She felt that he was not emotionally part of the group and his heart was not in the effort.

She liked the way the assignments were set up. She could learn and improve right from the first one, and engage and learn at a higher level than was the case with her other courses. She would have liked this experience in all her other courses. The online course was good 'teaching' according to her. The quality of the courses that she had enrolled for differed within the same faculty, especially when compared to this one.

The well-planned schedule of the course assisted her with planning all her activities. She did not experience any logistical or technical problems on the course besides the initial problems with the chatroom.

- **Gay (second delivery, interview on 14/11/2001)**

She was excited at first about taking this course but had a lot of technical problems with her modem that prevented her from having access to the Internet. Her supervisor at work did not allow her to use the Internet at work for study purposes. From home connectivity was expensive. She also had problems with her browser. She always felt behind the other learners because of problems with access. By the time she did get connected there were a lot of contributions and the discussions has gone off on a tangent. The facilitator did not give much guidance in general. Feedback on individual contributions was insufficient. There were also some very good candidates and they were a bit intimidating.

She was a very practical person who valued her own experience, but the facilitator always wanted more theory. She battled on the Internet to find

appropriate resources for this purpose, and she also battled to get to the resources mentioned in the content. The facilitator did not make the exact purpose of the theoretical content clear in his expectations. She tended to forget theory in the long run. She did discuss this with the second facilitator and got ideas from her as to what she could do to make her assignments more balanced. The workload was heavy and regular contributions were expected. The scheduled nature of the course helped her a lot as she could discipline herself accordingly. Print-based study had advantages, but here she could work constantly and it was easier in the long run.

She did feel part of the group and got help and support from fellow learners. Diana once contacted her and asked her whether she was still coping and whether she needed help. The communication was good in general and she had a good response from support staff. In this kind of course environment it was easier to communicate with lecturers. She preferred to communicate via e-mail.

- **Jenny (second delivery, interview on 14/11/2001)**

She thoroughly enjoyed the course although it took much more of her time. But she learned more than she had previously in her other print-based courses. In general there was better communication than with correspondence delivery. She liked discussing things with people rather than just reading. She would like to do more courses in this way. She just rushed through her print-based courses and exams – she postponed everything until the last moment.

The content and theoretical requirements were not unjustified. She believed anyone should be able to cope with this and understand it. She enjoyed the social course environment as she could talk to people. Whenever she had something to say somebody responded. This was not possible in print-based study. The fact that learners came from different backgrounds helped to widen her perspective on issues. There was an opportunity to express herself and

think about other people's replies. She had to stay abreast of what was happening in the forums otherwise she could fall behind.

She noticed that Rian was a bit silent as facilitator and never got properly involved, but Vasi (the second facilitator) did get involved sufficiently. However, it was difficult however to take part in the online presentations while at the same time writing a number of examinations. She struggled considerably. The scheduled nature of the course helped her to manage her time.

It was easy to navigate through the course site as she found it very accessible. She did not experience any technical problems. Only the chatroom was a problem at the beginning, and once the server was down for a short period.

- **Mary (second delivery, interview on 15/11/2001)**

She really enjoyed the course and would like to take more courses in this way. The social nature of the course suited her well. It was very different from her other print-based courses as there was almost no communication on print delivery. She liked the quality of interaction with the small group of people from many backgrounds, and she felt she had something to contribute from her own context and experience in the human resources field.

The workload forced her to stay focussed. Print-based study was a last minute rush to study the content for the exam. She enjoyed the collaborative assignments and working in the groups. The idea of receiving one mark as a team worked well for her. She enjoyed the course because she could do all the Internet research, but her phone connection went up to R700,00 in only one month. She established herself well with other professional groups online as a result and she was continuing conversations with them regarding issues from this course. She intended to continue developing her skills in the HCD field as a result.

She found it quite difficult to express herself online in writing. But this way of learning helped her to gain confidence in making her thoughts public. She wanted to be online every night, although she had to think a lot to reply to postings and to put her own thoughts online. She had a lot of practical ideas to discuss, but the discussions sometimes focussed too much on the content provided. Sometimes the group went off the topic and was then redirected. She was applying everything she learned on the course to her job. She felt intimated by two very strong learners who seemed to dominate the discussions. In general she did not get much back from the group on her ideas. The facilitator was very quiet. She noticed that he did not communicate with her after she had introduced herself in the Student Café. He was not nearly as bubbly as Vasi – she thought he was a bit serious.

The chatroom was a problem because it was down at the beginning. She once sent an e-mail to the Library people but they did not reply. She had trouble accessing some databases. They did not reply to her and this hampered her efforts. But in general the communication on the course was very good. She and Diana might have been in the same boat regarding the issue of paying an international learner levy for postage – one did not receive anything via the post.

- **Shane (second delivery, interview one 15/11/2001)**

He had already passed 29 modules at Unisa through correspondence. He totally changed his outlook as a result of this course He liked the online delivery, but had to cope with a job change.

The interaction helped his learning. He considered groupwork to be a good idea as there weren't always answers forthcoming from the prescribed content. Many answers were provided in the discussions and he found a lot of information. With correspondence courses this never happens. He felt that he

had enjoyed more quality interaction in this module than in all his other 29 modules combined. There was a 1000% better communication in this course. He was satisfied with Rian's performance as facilitator, but he thought that Rian came across as a stereotypical professor. Vasi, however, was a very passionate person – she came across as a person who ate, slept and drank the issues discussed in this course. He had trouble with the roles of the moderator and the summariser during the online presentations. These roles were not clearly described.

He considered that a written exam would be far easier than this course. He struggled a lot to get hold of appropriate resources for the assignment work and lacked Internet research skills. It was important to think and apply the content in assignments and discussions. He was of the opinion that there was a good balance between theory and research in the course. What he learned and applied had become part of his own personal make-up. In general, his work contexts demanded results and did not pay much attention to him as a person. He got much more value out of his studies on this course. He had changed as a person on this course – he was looking at himself and the organisations he worked in differently. According to Shane it would be beneficial to most Unisa staff to take this course.

He felt it was impossible to get real value out of his studies via a correspondence mode. He usually rushed through everything neglecting important aspects of learning in the process. Learners got 'free access to exams' in print-based courses. On first-year level it was multiple-choice questions only in the exam and this did not help much. In general he felt that assignments should be brought back to print-based courses, and that they should contribute towards exam credits. It would increase the quality of the learning experience. Learners should have the opportunity to apply what they have learned on the course in their assignments.

- **Zeta (second delivery, interview on 16/11/2001)**

She found the course most informative and enjoyed the feedback from other people. The content provided was good as it served as good stimulation for her assignments and participation. She would like to take more courses in this way. She liked the way Unisa was placing information in the hands of learners in this way.

It was valuable to communicate and learn as a group as she was able to test her understanding and ideas against those of the group members. The different perspectives were helpful and stimulating. She also realised that it was possible to do teamwork over a distance in this way. She made good friends with some of the learners on the course and they were communicating outside the course environment. The learning experience was not as lonely as it was with correspondence courses. She felt more empowered and had gained confidence to express her own ideas publicly – as she is an introverted person this was normally difficult for her.

Initially she had serious problems as she had to upgrade her personal computer at work, but then everything went well technically. She did not have the facilities to connect from home. This would have helped her to follow discussions and take part more frequently as she felt pressured to do this. She did find the workload more excessive, but this was justified as she was stimulated to think differently and to think about others' comments. The way the course was delivered also influenced her as professional very deeply. She had to unlearn old ways of viewing things and of communicating. It was a very intense learning experience for her as a person. The presence of other learners helped to broaden her perspective.

She enjoyed the teamwork with Arney as a good team leader. She made friends with Gay from another group and they were still corresponding via e-mail. The feedback on assignments was not bad. She had to do more research and had to provide stronger foundations for her practical notions. The overall support on the course was tremendous. The support staff formed the external boundaries

of the group as they could help gourps to get back on track or to assist them to do things differently. Vasi's guidance was also very good.

- **Arney (second delivery, on 19/11/2001)**

He was a lecturer himself at a neighbouring university. The course experience was a learning curve regarding the dynamics of online groups and how forums could be used. He had not studied a course totally on the Internet before and now he had lots of ideas. It was interesting to see what elicited a good response from fellow class mates and what not. Sometimes Diana came up with very good ideas, but her e-mails were too long. The fact that learners came from very different professional backgrounds made the course content evolve and become applicable to various fields.

He was wondering whether learners really read the content and was not sure whether it was essential to get a good grip on all the concepts and ideas provided. The facilitator did not perform that well. He had to say things to keep the conversation going, and he did not challenge the learners sufficiently. He felt that there was too little time to prepare the group presentations.

The chatroom was a problem. Other access and connectivity problems were related to his previous employer's poor infrastructure. He had to go to work very early in order to take part and to communicate online. From Unisa's side he did not experience any technical problems. He enjoyed the communication on this course. He observed learners like Elaine gained confidence as the course progressed and she became a quality contributor.

- **Alex (second delivery, interview on 19/11/2001)**

He liked the online course because it was more interactive and he liked dealing with people while learning. Print was very anonymous and there were no assignments in print-based courses. A month before the exam he normally took up his books. With the online courses he had to be there continuously and had to be motivated to work regularly. The schedule helped him to make time to complete his assignments

The online discussions and groupwork were very beneficial in that he was confronted with different viewpoints. He liked the social nature of the forums and was impressed with the experience and performances of Arney and Diana. As a "junior" in the group he was also able to integrate his own experience and opinions. The facilitator's role was fine as he provided guidance when needed. All three key support staff were great and he never experienced communication or support problems. The facilitator played a less involved role when it was obvious that the learners were performing well in the forums. When there were problems he steered the participants back on track. He received sufficient feedback on his assignments.

He did not experience any technical problems. The chatroom was a problem initially – but later there was more pressure to perform elsewhere in the online environment and learners probably did not have time to play with this facility. In addition, the pressures from work and other courses did not allow experimentation. The content and importance of theory was necessary as it helped with orientation for further research for the assignments.

He liked the communicative learning environment. He would remember many learners' views and ideas. He read the postings and responses and could seek application in his own work environment. Should he have the choice he would do all his courses online. He did not like courses which evolved around a prescribed book only. The online courses were about being involved. The experience of the group of learners put him in the real world.

4.5.2   A successful online learning community

A community of friends

In this social environment they formed friendships outside the course and felt that they were in a supportive environment. Zeta (interview, 16/11/2001), Gay (interview, 14/11/2001), Nomsa (interview, 23/06/2001) and Gwen (interview, 23/06/2001) mentioned strong friendships. After the first course forum had closed, Diana requested all learners via e-mail to continue in the Student Café:

> *Hi everyone*
>
> *Can we continue to debate and interact in the Student Café during the next two weeks?*
>
> *Thx*
>
> *Diana*

As a South African living temporarily in Washington DC, she clearly enjoyed and benefited from being part of the group and felt 'at home'. Magda (interview, 28/06/2001) was comforted by the fact that she was a member of the group and knew that she was not alone in her struggle to make a success of this course.

Sharing ideas and experience

The pilot OLC-based course was a resourceful environment as a number of learners reported benefiting from others' experience and ideas, and could test their own ideas against those of other participants in public. Most learners appreciated the resourceful environment and benefited from others' experience by sharing ideas. Gwen mentioned that she felt 'robbed' of the experience that some of the 'lurkers' did not share with her (interview, 23/06/2001).In this learner-centred environment participants could contribute actively to the entire learning experience. They were able to gain confidence to express their

opinions in public and even to criticise the facilitator (like Gwen [interview, 23/06/2001] and Arney [interview, 19/11/2001] had done).

Alex and Zeta posted the following greetings showing appreciation for the fact that they could share ideas and experience with fellow learners in this environment:

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IOP377-J Student café

Farewell

Posted by: Alex
Date: Thursday, 22 November 2001, at 12:41

Thanks to Rian and Japie for hosting this very interesting course as well as all the other learners whose contributions were very enlightening (to say the least).

I am off to Durban for 10 days to do absolutely nothing. All the best to everyone over this festive season.

Bye

Al

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IOP377-J Student café

Greetings

Posted by: Zeta
Date: Thursday, 22 November 2001, at 10:37

Hi everyone

This has been a very interesting course and has definitely made me more interested in being a life long learner. Thank you everyone for all the different comments and ideas given, it really makes one think and embrace diversity and culture differences more willingly.

Thank you Rian and Japie for your comments. It has proved valuable to me in my work environment and already I have seen the difference as I have implemented the various ideas given in this course.

Cheers

Zubeda

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Engaging the learner

Greg Kearsley and Schneiderman (Kearsley, 1999: 67) presents engagement theory as a framework underlying learning in the online learning community. Engagement theory suggests that learners must be actively engaged in meaningful tasks for effective learning to occur. This means that they should be designing, planning, problem solving, evaluating, making decisions, or involved in discussions.

A collaborative constructivist learning environment was created for this course, embracing the idea of situated learning in drawing on a community of experience. Learners collaborated and integrated their experience making materials and activities realistic and directly tied to learner interest. Learners really engaged themselves in this learning environment to reap the benefits, and they expected everybody on the course to be committed and to contribute equally from their experience and knowledge. Diana even wanted to increase the size of the group (interview, 13/11/2001). She was quite a strong participant and wanted the debates and interaction to be stronger – she found some learners 'taking a free ride' unacceptable. The majority of learners reacted positively to being involved as compared to print isolation and passivity. Alex labelled print-based study as anonymous in this regard (interview, 19/11/2001). But being engaged and doing your best lead to self-imposed pressure and commitment. Lea (interview, 23/06/2001) reacted negatively to this pressure, but Jolene (interview, 28/06/2001) regarded it essential to her being successful on the course.

Becoming empowered

In the online learning community learners become empowered as they were guided to take control of the own learning. The learners on this course needed to master the skills, processes, and netiquette, and strove to build an online

community of peers who worked together to provide mutual support and challenge. This concurs with the report of Harasim et al (1995: 218). Through authentic contributions and critical evaluation, the learners became empowered. They were exposed to a wide variety of opinions and could make positive contributions by pointing out inconsistencies. Jolene reported (interview, 28/06/2001) that she became critical about her own input and about what others had to say. In the online course environment her opinion was regarded as important.

Arney made very positive comments about the way this course was presented, but as an empowered learner he did not hesitate in expressing his concerns with the way the facilitators performed their duties:

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IOP377-J Course feedback

Overall feedback

Posted by: Arney
Date: Monday, 19 November 2001, at 07:14

I found the course overall to be a positive experience. I think a lot more true learning took place during this course than in courses where one has to memorise theory. I have to congratulate Japie and the people at UNISA who made this possible. If UNISA can have more courses like this, I am sure that it will create a huge demand for its courses amongst adult/mature learners.

However, there is one thing I think could be improved on to enhance learning further - the facilitators could have acted more like learning facilitators. As it were, they were usually most active only at the start and end of each forum, and usually in the form of a summary, more information or an exhortation. In other words, they acted more like conventional lecturers than learning facilitators. I expected them to be active in questioning our views, challenging our assumptions, stretching our minds etc. Learning facilitators should be true to the root meaning of education ("educare" which means "to draw out") - and prompt us to surpass ourselves without telling us what to do.

I have some ideas for how one could participate in such online communities to enhance the process of community building, based on the principles of building other communities e.g. as discussed in Scott Peck's "Different Drum" or as contained in the principles of improvisation. I shall share these at a later stage once I have collated all the material.

Once again, thank you for a great course.

Arney

It is evident from responses of participants that the online environment is
challenging. It changes a person's views on how problems and criticism are
handled. Priest (in White 2000: 44) uses Gross's perspective on how
empowerment takes place in the adult learning environment. Learners have to
take command of their own learning – they master more things and master
them better than those who rely on receiving 'ready made' knowledge through
transmission. These learners need to have a greater zest for learning and make
better use of their time. The success in learning depends more on the learners'
own engagement than on the subject itself. Almost every aspect of the adult
learner's life becomes a latent power to enhance learning, but only if the adult
learner takes control and initiates ways to utilise it.

Critical thinking and deep learning

For Palof and Pratt (1999: 60) collaborative online learning is similar to Chris
Argyris's double-loop learning. Learners cannot just mechanically apply a
concept supplied to them, but they to need to reflect critically on their own
behaviour and then change how they act. Within the online learning
environment learners connect to the learning experience via the technology,
and then they are not just confronted with course material, but are also
challenged to look critically at the learning process and at their own
performance in the course environment. Learners are transformed by their
engagement in the community experience. On the sample course, learners
realised that they had to think deeply and even do some independent research
before they could make a contribution online. They felt quite exposed and were
not prepared to make contributions of an unacceptable quality. This aspect
caused the workload to increase for many learners.

Personal transformation and meta-cognitive development

Learners like Zeta (interview, 16/11/2001), Jolene (interview, 28/06/2001) and Shane (interview, 15/11/2001) reported that they had changed as people while being on this course (transformative learning). Shane specifically mentioned that the experience that he gained from this learning environment would assist him to approach his job differently. He might even consider starting a new job. Zeta started applying different ways of communicating at the office as a result of how she learned to communicate on this course (interview, 16/11/2001). In this regard Elaine posted the following message at the end of the second delivery:

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IOP377-J Student cafe
Goodbye!
Posted By: Elaine
Date: Friday, 23 November 2001, at 16:22

Hi everyone

I just wanted to say goodbye to all my classmates, and to thank Japie, Rian and Vasie for the absolutely amazing course which you prepared for us. The last few months has been a complete paradigm shift for me, and I don't remember when I last learnt so much - and enjoyed learning it!

Thanks so much for all your time and effort.

I want to wish everyone a very happy and restful festive season... and good luck with all the results!

Thanks so much.

Elaine

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Meta-cognitive development occurred with most learners. They were thinking differently about how they wanted to learn. Content provision and venue-linked examinations were not preferred and they had learned the value of teamwork and communication in order to reach objectives. Learners had become critical about the way they used to learn. Vanessa (interview, 28/06/2001) reported that she learned a lot and the course experience took her

outside of the content boundaries through independent research and discussion. Her personal struggles and views became relevant in this learning experience. The limited scope of print-based content was not good in this regard. During the online experience she could discover what she could learn and not what the lecturer could teach. For Neville, a learner on the first delivery, this module became a learning experience that remained with him and he wanted to stay informed about how the project progressed. Half-way through the second delivery the course coordinator received the following e-mail:

> *Hi Japie*
>
> *Thought I'd send you a quick e-mail to let you know my e-mail address has changed. It is now neville@anonymous.com. How has the second delivery of the second delivery of the online course IOP377-J been going?*
>
> *Regards*
>
> *Neville*

Facilitation and support

Teachers are challenged to duplicate with CMC the conditions that encourage productive interchanges such as occur when people meet in person (Warren & Rada 1998, p. 71). But in spite of this challenge by technological advances, much of current Internet delivery is about 'throwing learners at the Internet' and calling it sound pedagogy (Greening 1998, p. 30). The mere uploading of content on the Internet does not mean learning has taken place (Rosenlund et al. 1999, p. 195). For the online learning community to be a successful learning experience, facilitation is probably the single most important element. The failing of many CMC DE learning programs has been the inability or unwillingness to facilitate a collaborative learning process (Palof and Pratt, 1999: 82). The whole learning experience is to be a mediated conversation - a dialogue started in an open ended course environment with limited structure. With the help of facilitation learners are expected to work together to generate deeper levels of understanding and critical evaluation of the study material. The facilitators of online courses should provide or direct learners to sufficient

support. Although most participants in the online learning community may be self-directed adult learners, they will be in need of meaningful relationships. They will need feedback on how they struggle with concepts and issues from trusted people (Priest in White, 2000: 41). Communication has to be effective and special sensitivity is needed for the unique experiences.

The responses from the sample course indicated that facilitation and immediate support was highly appreciated although they all wanted to see improvement in the facilitation as provided by Rian. For Neville, the support and help was just a button away (interview, 23/06/2001) and Shane had no trouble to state that he communicated more in one online course than in the 29 other modules that he had completed with Unisa (interview, 15/11/2001). Zeta provided a striking perspective on the role of the support staff in the online learning community – they provide the external boundaries for the group (interview, 16/11/2001). The online environment can also be a place where one can act without the necessary considerations for others. Zeta (interview, 16/11/2001) and Gay (interview, 14/11/2001) were both intimidated by the two very strong learners who were extremely visible and contributed very assertively. Gwen admitted that she underwent a change in personality and was perceived as almost aggressive in the way she reacted to the opinions and ideas of other learners (interview, 23/6/2001). Facilitating a community demands a strong commitment to the promotion of equal opportunities, netiquette and respect for others.

Gaining confidence and accepting responsibility

Learners found the discussion and groupwork environments labour intensive, but they were all positive that they had gained from their fellow learners and were able to share their own ideas and opinions. But this did not come without doing some independent research 'behind the scenes'. Mary reported having had trouble initially but then she gained confidence and researched the Internet for more information (interview, 15/11/2001). She eventually joined some

professional human resource associations online. A number of learners, for example Neville (interview, 23/06/2001), complained about the difficulty and intensity of the online groupwork. But some learners took up this challenge. Diana, a strong learner and coordinator for one of the small groups, did everything in her power to keep the group together and to motivate them as far as possible. Early in the second delivery Shane, who changed jobs, disappeared for a while. The course coordinator received the following e-mail from Diana:

> *Hi Japie*
>
> *Do you have any idea of what happened to Shane? I contacted the other people assigned to Group 2 and received and answer from Grace. She seems to have problem with Internet access, but I cannot get hold of Shane.*
>
> *Thx*
>
> *Diana*

Later after she had followed up on information she received regarding Shane's new e-mail address:

> *Hi Japie*
>
> *Yes, Shane has answered. I have just spoken to everybody via e-mail. It seems as if there are some de-motivated people in the group at the moment. I will go to the course website to see whether someone has reacted.*
>
> *Regards*
>
> *Diana*

(The message was translated from Afrikaans.) She kept the team going and also offered her own time, knowing that some learners might have been busy studying their other courses:

> *Hi guys and girls*
>
> *Shane has not received any input from the rest of the team yet. Although the presentation is only due by the 22nd, we need to start wrapping up. It takes some time to compile the final product.*
>
> *Please make sure you are using Shane's correct e-mail address when you send your contribution.*

Let me know if you need some help with the content or if you are running out of time. We are not busy at the office at the moment, so I have some time during the day to get to studies.

Good luck and study hard for your other subjects.

Diana

The groupwork needed stronger, responsible learners like Diana, but it was the community and group spirit that kept learners together and made gestures like the above possible.

Transcending boundaries

The majority of learners wanted to do more courses online. However Esther felt more secure and comfortable with print-based study as it was more predictable for her (interview, 23/06/2001). Learners succeeded in transcending the subject field and course contents. The boundaries of the course expanded through learner discussions, contributions and assignments. Making their own contribution, and making friends, assured the sharing of knowledge. Neville (interview, 23/06/2001) valued the opportunity to add his own experience. In addition, the activities and discussions led to deep exploration of topics and ideas. Vanessa (interview, 28/06/2001) was of the opinion that the collaborative and learner-centred nature of the course allowed her to go beyond the ideas contained in the content by doing independent research and integrating her own viewpoints. Mary (interview, 15/11/2001) reported that she had gone beyond the content by making contact with other human resource professionals through the Internet. She was building a network through which she could support her professional ideals in the same way as the group was supporting one another on the course.

Workload and writing skills

As this online course contained many more activities and responsibilities than the standard print-based course at Unisa, a course schedule was provided to

assist learners with their time management and planning. Alex mentioned, along with a number of other learners, that the schedule assisted towards time management (interview, 19/11/2001). Jolene appreciated the exercise in style and layout for academic writing as learners were able to exercise their writing skills for the academic environment (interview, 28/06/2001). The opportunity for mastery was added in the second delivery and learners could send in drafts for comments. Diana reported that she was able to improve her assignments right from the very first one as a result of this (interview, 13/11/2001).

A successful learning environment

In summary, learners reported that in this asynchronous environment they were able to read contributions, think and do research before replying. Elaine reported wanting to get up at three and make a contribution as a thought suddenly struck her (interview, 13/11/2001). There was always a new contribution that she could read. Although one was not there, the conversation continues and nothing was lost. Zeta (interview, 16/11/2001), Gay (interview, 14/11/2001), and Gwen (interview, 23/06/2001) specifically reported that they had made friends with the online learners and continued these friendships outside course activities. Jolene realised after a couple of weeks that learning was self-directed. She then took control and did a lot of independent research and thinking in order to improve her contributions and assignments (interview, 26/6/2001). Zeta (interview, 16/11/2001) was strengthened by the 'presence' of support staff. They formed the external boundaries of the community – she felt protected. Elaine (interview, 13/11/2001) regarded Unisa in general as very distant, but in this course environment she did not feel that distance.

Through Internet communication technologies communication with and access to support staff and fellow learners was improved. Neville (interview, 23/06/2001) said that he was comforted by the fact that help was just 'a button away'. Learners got the opportunity to present their work 'in public' and receive comments. Almost all learners on this course felt empowered as they

were able to present their views and experiences to the group. Through technology learners were able to work in teams. Learners felt that they were more equal in being able to participate online. They could all contribute and share. Many learners struggled with the technology but in the end they all gained new skills in working with the technologies. All learners were upset about the chatroom being down for some time although it was there only as an additional tool.

In terms of the successful online learning community (discussed in Chapter 2) as defined by Kellogg (1999), Lally and Barret (1999) and Lin et al (1995) this pilot course can be considered successful in terms of the following criteria:

- Participants were united through a common sense of purpose (wanting to master the topic).
- Group identity and cohesiveness developed (identification with the group and forming strong friendships).
- Learners were able to integrate diverse curricular and co-curricular experience by working collaboratively (integration of their own experience and negative reaction to those who did not share).
- They did independent research and resource identification (independent Internet research and resources).
- Internet communication technologies were used to discuss information and build knowledge (provided content was not the primary source).
- Learners exposed themselves to continuous feedback and criticism in public forums in order to test their own constructions.
- In order to succeed learners had to take responsibility for their learning (the right attitude was important).

However, the course delivery was not without problems in terms of facilitation (more involvement), technical issues (the chatroom), workload (too many activities schedules simultaneously) and learner registration problems.

Although the course can be seen as successful in terms of the online learning community, it is apparent from learner feedback that it required a certain type of person to be successful. A number of learners reported feeling overwhelmed or disoriented, but then later they took control and eventually succeeded.

4.5.3   Characteristics of a successful online learner

From the trials and tribulations of these learners (on the two deliveries) it is evident that certain personal characteristics would be vital for a learner to be successful. As the online learning community is a more learner-centred learning environment, the learner becomes responsible for his/her own success. This responsibility demands certain characteristics:

- High motivation and self-discipline;
- Responsibility and adaptability;
- Compassion and a positive attitude;
- Independence;
- Active learning and engagement;
- Good organizational and time management skills;
- Adaptability;
- Patience and tolerance;
- Communication skills;
- Writing skills;
- Good netiquette.

Learners like Gwen (interview, 23/06/2001), Nomsa (interview, 23/06/2001), Elaine (interview, 13/11/2001) and Jolene (interview, 28/06/2001) reported having to apply introspection and to assure a number of responsibilities were in order to cope in the online learning community. As it is an open and free environment to a certain extent, it is also one that demands strength and self-discipline to expose oneself in public and apply self-pressure in order to

continuously contribute. Those who felt that they had the opportunity to become aggressive in defending themselves or the ones who dominated all the discussions, could take another look at the information on netiquette that was part of the orientation. Writing skills are paramount for this kind of learning environment as all contributions and activities are text-based and learners have to be able to express themselves through this medium.

4.5.4 Pass and retention rates

In order to evaluate the success of this online delivery, it is justified to compare pass and retention rates of both delivery modes. The following table provides information on the numbers and percentages of learners who registered and completed the course both by print-based and online mode. The final average grades are also provided.

Description	Print 1st	Print 2nd	OLC 1st	OLC 2nd
Registered	94	132	9	9
Completed	40 (42%)	27 (20%)	7 (78%	7 (78%)
Final average	46%	40%	63%	69%

For the first delivery the print equivalent of the course succeeded in retaining only 42% of registered learners, while the online version secured a 78% retention rate. The final mark was also 17% higher than that of print-based learners. In view of the fact that there was a significant difference in learner numbers, the group was of the opinion that the way the learning experience was designed and delivered had a tremendous effect on whether learners decided to remain in the course or drop out.

To gain an idea of the success rate of the course over the two deliveries, the retention rates and average final mark are significant. The print equivalent of the course succeeded in retaining only 20% of registered learners (which is 22% lower than in the previous semester), but the online version secured a 78% retention rate (which is constant). The final mark was also 29% higher than that

of print-based learners. The print-based experience is a cause for concern – it shows an increase in learner numbers but a drastic decline in the completion rate and an average mark that is 10% lower than the pass mark of 50%. The online group's average mark improved by 6%.

It must be noted that the numbers of registered learners for the print-based deliveries were significantly higher than those for the online delivery. This may influence the legitimacy of this comparison. Retention rates for this online course might have been influenced positively by the procedure followed to inform learners prior to registration regarding workload, commitment and technical aspects of the online learning community. Statistics were obtained from the Examinations Section on 30/11/2001.

4.5.5   Becoming critical of print-based study

With the exception of one learner who felt more comfortable with print, and two others who have never studied through Unisa, all learners had a positive learning experience in the online learning community and preferred this way of study above the print-based studies which they had done before. The print-based delivery of Unisa can be described as problematic for a number of reasons according to learner feedback.

As discussed in Chapter 2, it would seem that the very principle of independence and self-study may have caused a high degree of alienation within the print-based learning experience. Alex called himself anonymous within this environment (interview, 19/11/2001). He became an entity with a number in the system. Shane (interview, 15/11/2001) mentioned that he communicated more on this one module than on the 29 others he had completed. Elaine (interview, 13/11/2001) experienced Unisa as distant and not easy to communicate with. For Alex (interview, 23/06/2001), Diana (interview, 13/11/2001) and Shane (15/11/2001) the print-based learning experience was not much more than a textbook, a rush and an exam. This provides a shallow

learning experience. Although they had to work harder and had to contribute regularly on the online course, they gained much more and prefered to study this way. Shane (interview, 15/11/2001) did not see venue-linked written exams as a challenge, and multiple choice exams were viewed in the same light. He wanted essay assignments to be made compulsory in order to communicate and get feedback. For Diana (interview, 13/11/2001) the varying course quality within one faculty was of concern – learners could take this course and other courses of inferior quality in the same faculty. In this regard there seemed to be inconsistency regarding the commitment to quality. Except for Lea (interview, 28/06/2001) all learners had some suggestions on how to improve facilitation (teaching). In this course they experienced an exceptionally high support and facilitation service compared to what they were used to. Their print-based studies did not allow them to communicate and get feedback to their satisfaction. But Esther (interview, 23/06/2001), a senior and fourth-year learner, felt more comfortable in the print-based learning environment. She was satisfied with her print-package and the venue-linked examination. There was not as much pressure on her and it was more predictable. It is possible that senior Unisa learners, trapped in a comfort zone, may have difficulty getting used to a different pedagogy and learning environment.

Learners performed well in the collaborative (and social constructivist) learning environment. In the social environment learners could share ideas and experience, and could solve problems cooperatively. In general learners who experienced print-based study at Unisa preferred the online learning community as a quality learning environment. It must me emphasised that the negative comments aspects and suggestions highlighted in this section are not meant to disparage print-based delivery. They should rather be seen as an indication that there is room for improvement and that the possibility of allowing 'cross-fertilisation' to improve the standards of current print-based delivery should be investigated. The task would be to investigate the ways in which print-based learners could also be provided with some of the benefits

experienced in the online learning community. Even some senior learners, like Shane (interview, 15/11/2001) and Diana (interview, 13/11/2001) went so far as to make suggestions toward the improvement of print-based study.

4.6   Summary and conclusion

The statistics regarding learner demographics provided valuable information on the type of person that would enrol for an online course at Unisa. They seem to be mostly working adults whose lifestyles require mobility. In addition they want quality support and tuition, but do not want to lose the ability to self-pace and to integrate their own experience and ideas. Most learners who enrolled in the online course still had a heavy workload and a number of personal commitments to cope with. These factors require a highly committed, motivated, and responsible learner.

Learner grades and retention rates are significantly better when compared to print-based results. Regarding the qualities of the online learning community, the course was successful in terms of the following aspects:

- Social support (learners made friends and felt part of the group);
- Learner empowerment (they became confident to voice their opinions in public);
- Transformative learning (the learner changed as a person during the course)
- Critical reflection/self-reflection (learners reported having to reflect on their actions and contributions);
- Engaged learning (they reacted positively to being involved instead of isolated and passive as they were in print-based courses);
- A preferred learning environment (learners wanted to do more of their degree requirements via this mode);
- Self-imposed pressure and commitment (learners reported feeling the pressure and making the commitment to work in order to be successful);

- Worthwhile discussions (learners gained from others' opinions and could make their own contributions);
- Independent research (they reported doing a lot of independent research in order to contribute and do assignments);
- Exercising style and layout for academic writing (learners were able to exercise their writing skills for the academic environment);
- Facilitation and immediate support (The facilitator guided discussion and learners appreciated receiving an almost immediate response to their enquiries).

Johnson & Johnson's (1994, cited in Stacey, 1998, p. 36) claim that 'cooperative learning is used to increase student achievement , create more positive relationships among students, and generally improve students' psychological wellbeing', can be supported with the results from this sample course delivery. However, in a number of respects this degree of success forms a contrast with the print-based delivery that the learners were used to. They had felt alienated and the institution seemed distant. The learning experience had not allowed them to become involved and to deepen their understanding. The current examination procedure had not been a true test of their knowledge and capabilities. There were few opportunities to communicate and to receive feedback. Varying course quality in the same faculty disturbed learners.

Learners were not always satisfied and made suggestions towards improvement of online teaching practice. The degree of success that was achieved with this pilot course did, however, not come without a different commitment from support and teaching staff. It should be seen against the background of the Unisa print-based delivery system which may not easily accommodate such innovation. The next chapter will discuss the teaching experience.