

**ONLINE LEARNING EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS IN THE MED IN OPEN
AND DISTANCE LEARNING – A PHENOMENOGRAPHY OF THE DUAL
UNIVERSITY INITIATIVE**

by

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Declaration

I, **MISHACK THIZA GUMBO**, hereby declare that the research report submitted in the fulfilment of the requirements of the Mini-dissertation for the Master's Degree in Open Distance Learning (MEd in ODL), is my own work and that it has never been produced before and submitted to any other institution. Moreover, all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

Mishack Thiza Gumbo

30 August 2016

Abstract

This is a phenomenographic study, of which the aim was to explore the variation of experiences, needs, views and understandings through a phenomenographic study of academics who were enrolled in the MEd in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) at Unisa during 2012-2015. The MEd in ODL is a dual university programme between University of South Africa (Unisa) and University of Maryland University College (UMUC). The research question was around issues which Unisa academic staff members experienced during the course of their enrolment for the MEd in ODL. Relevant scholarly literature on online learning, theories for online learning, and previous research on online learning, was surveyed in this regard. Variation theory which framed the study through a phenomenographic research lens was described.

Interviews were conducted with seven participants from the students on the MEd in ODL programme. Postings on MyUnisa Discussion Forum which were treated as data were analysed in relation to the aspects raised in the interviews. The findings revealed students' varied online experiences in the three main aspects namely, experience and understanding, understanding the object of learning and learning objects. Important recommendations made, were based on the findings.

In conclusion, the findings exhibited students' varied experiences about issues which they battle with in the MEd in ODL programme, of which Unisa should take into consideration as they further enrol students in the programme.

Keywords:

Online experiences, MEd in ODL, academics, students, technologies, learning, phenomenography, variation theory, distance education, university.

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Acronyms

CHE: Council on Higher Education

CMC: Computer-mediated Communication

COL: Commonwealth of Learning

DE: Distance Education

GAO: Government Accountability Office

HEA: Higher Education Authority

ICT: Information and Communication Technologies

LEO: Learning Experience Online

MCC: Monroe Community College

MEd: Master's in Education

NIACE: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education

ODL: Open and Distance Learning

UMUC: University of Maryland University College

Unisa: University of South Africa

US-based: United States-based

USA: United States of America

WebCT: Web Course Tools

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife, Rebone Mmaditau Gumbo. Thanks so much for your profound understanding, sacrifice, patience, support and prayers when studying in my academic journey (i.e. ‘stole’ some quality time I had to spend with you and my daughters). Not once have I heard or seen in your countenance any signs of perturbation due to my absence. But I can attest that I have heard words of support and appreciation, and watched you pray for me always. I am so proud of you, Bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!

Quote

“Educators are challenged to help today’s students reach a level of information literacy that can support them during their academic career and beyond. Information literacy implies the acquisition of three primary skills: basic information technology skills, information resource skills (such as the ability to identify useful resources), and critical thinking skills” (Lorenzo, Oblinger & Dziuban, 2006:2).

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Chapter One

Orientation into the study

1.1 Introduction and background

The study being reported here inquired into Unisa staff online learning experiences, views, needs and understanding who enrolled in an MEd in Open and Distance Learning (ODL), through a collaboration between University of South Africa (Unisa) and University of Maryland University College (UMUC). Both these institutions are open and distance learning institutions. I was interested in Unisa staff's experiences which comprised a range of varied experiences, views, understandings and needs about such a master's degree course offered completely online at the two universities as a dual degree. How did this staff deal with the day-to-day teaching and learning pressures as well as that of completing a postgraduate study in the ODL institutional environment? This question motivated my research into the experiences of this staff.

This study used variation theory as a theoretical framework with phenomenographic approach to explore the experiences of Unisa staff enrolled for the ODL during 2012-2015. This theory is explained and substantiated in Chapter Two.

The MEd in ODL, which is offered through the above stated collaboration, is meant to develop and skill Unisa staff so that it can provide even better service through the online mode. The institution's mandate is to respond to societal, public and private sector needs and ODL. This should be perceived as a way to address open distance and technology-enhanced learning in South Africa and Africa. Online teaching and learning promises to offer a solution to educate the masses who cannot attend contact institutions because of many personal and situational reasons. Thus, the aim with online learning is to empower the workforce (O'Donoghue, Singh & Green 2004:71).

Due to the advancement and complexities of educational technology and media via online learning can now be facilitated via a variety of learning management platforms such as WebCT,

Sakai, Blackboard, and others. These learning management platforms provide media tools such as Blogs, Discussion Forums and Wikis. Most lecturers in higher educational institutions do not have educational qualifications in addition to their professional qualifications, hence this MED addresses the gap in teaching pedagogies at an ODL institution. Aspects such as ODL theories of learning and technology skills for teaching at ODL institutions were a few of the important issues addressed in the MEd in ODL. From the perspective of Unisa blended distance education and online learning were used for learning and teaching until 2012, and in 2015 Unisa started to move towards the 4th and 5th generation of ODL, as displayed in table 1.1.

Table 1.1: Generations of distance education

Generation of DE & ODL	Pedagogy and interaction	Medium	Production	Storage	Delivery
1 st (1451–1916 CE)	<i>Behaviourism</i> . Content based and dominated by limitations of print technology – self-pacing – mass delivery	Text and images – the advent of film	Printing press, manual design and recording	Books and letters	Mail system
2 nd (1918–1955)	<i>Behaviourism and cognitivism</i> . Content based with limited interaction – mass delivery of DE and controlled access based on gender, class/caste, culture and age	Text, images, sound and video (film) – the start of instructional television	Printing press, sound and video/film recording, manual and computer design/programming	Recordings – audio cassettes and video cassettes	Mail system/television/telephone/sound playback equipment
3 rd (1956–1968)	<i>Behaviourism/cognitivism/constructivism</i> . Mostly asynchronous with limited interaction – mass delivery of DE – computer-aided instruction – computer-assisted learning	Text, images, sound, video, instructional and live television	Printing press, sound and video/film recording an computer design/ programming	Recordings – audio cassettes and video cassettes –storage on discs	Mail system/ television/ telephone/ computers/ video and sound playback equipment – first computers used to send batches of data
4 th (1969–2005)	<i>Behaviourism/cognitivism/constructivism/social constructivism or constructionism enactivism/ connectivism</i> . Content starting to move away from the university – asynchronous and synchronous interaction – mass delivery becomes problematic and demands for interaction challenge ICTs	Text, images, sound and video	Computer and videoconferencing were available in 4 th (even in the 3 rd) generation		Mail system/ television/telephone/ computers video and sound playback – equipment – computers starting to become a generic device and WWW (internet) as a generic platform
5 th (present day)	<i>Behaviourism/cognitivism/constructivism/social constructivism /? Connectivism (why not?)</i> . Content starting to move away from the university – asynchronous and synchronous interaction – mass delivery becomes problematic and demands for interaction challenge ICTs	Text, images, sound and video Web 2.0 interactive online technologies	Printing press, sound and video/film recording and computer design/ programming/user involvement Blogs, mini-blogs, chats, email, message boards, online conferencing, social networks, wikis	Digital storage media (CD, DVD, memory sticks, central servers, hard drives, etc)	Mail system/television/ telephone/computers/video and sound playback – equipment – computers starting to become generic device and the WWW (internet) as a generic platform Asynchronous and synchronous delivery

Source: Adapted from Heydenrych and Prinsloo (2010:5-26) and Clark and Mayer (2008) in Mbat (2014:23 -25)

Another version of the generations of distance education, according to Garrison (1985:235-239), discusses mainly three models, namely correspondence, telecommunication and computer generation. Correspondence education combined the printed word and the postal system as a medium of two-way communication. It represents a paradigm shift from the face-to-face to distance teaching and learning. The history of distance learning dates back to 1833 (Henschke 2009). Furthermore, distance learning is still likely the most prevalent form of education delivery mode even today. However, though it provides vast educational opportunities for the masses in terms of access, its disadvantage is the potentially slow and ponderous response rate between the teacher and students. This disadvantage has been the cause for alternative means that would expedite the rate of interaction between the teacher and students.

Telecommunication is about the electronic transmission of communication over a distance by using wire, radio, optical or other electromagnetic channels. The message is transmitted or received in voice, video or data communications format. Its use in distance education context includes telephone and teleconferencing. A teacher could be inundated by influx of telephonic inquiries from students and compelled to give tutorials over the telephone. When teleconferencing or even video conferencing was an option, students would be constrained by travelling to the local centres and be confined between determined time slots for the sessions.

Electronic-enhanced learning and mobile learning have changed the face of distance learning in remarkable ways. A student at a distance can virtually enjoy complete independence but still experience quality two-way interaction which is characterised by interaction, feedback and feed-forward (Koen, Bitzer & Beets 2012:231-233). The beauty of technology-enhanced learning is the provision of immediate feedback. This immediate feedback will depend on the availability and effective functioning of the infrastructural Information and Communication Technology (ICT) system, which is needed to facilitate the interaction between the teacher and students and between students and students.

It is argued that the developments that occurred in ODL were the result of the interconnectedness of societal, technological and pedagogical innovations. The generations of distance education are

a depiction of the developments that have occurred in the field of distance learning over time (see table 1.1).

As part of its preparation to operate at the 5th generation distance education, Unisa entered into agreement with UMUC to jointly offer MEd in ODL. This course was rolled out in 2012. UMUC offers a semester-based Certificate in Distance Education and E-Learning which lasts for 18 months and comprises of five modules, namely, Orientation to Graduate Studies at UMUC (UCSP615), Foundations of Distance Education and E-Learning (OMDE601), Technology in Distance Education and E-Learning (OMDE603), Training and Learning with Multimedia (DETC620) and Emerging Technology Trends and Issues in Distance Education and E-Learning (DETC630). Unisa offers the remaining two more modules, which are Curriculum Development for ODL (ODL5902) and Leadership and Management (ODL5904) plus a Research Proposal Module (MPEDU91), followed by a Dissertation of limited scope. A student can register for ODL5902 and ODL5904 concurrently with MPEDU91 to be able to enrol for the Dissertation in the second year. Alternatively, the student can register for ODL5902 and ODL5904 only and for MPEDU91 and the Dissertation thereafter. This study targeted Unisa staff who had completed or were just about to complete the UMUC component and was thus enrolled for the Unisa component in the years 2014 to 2015.

The results could inform teaching and learning in the online MEd in ODL at Unisa. Thus, the contribution of this study lies in informing Unisa of the strengths and weaknesses, and the different perspectives and views of the participants of this online MEd in ODL.

1.2 Problem statement

Unisa embarked on a MEd in ODL which is offered fully online as a dual degree programme with UMUC. The major concern of this study is about the online learning experiences, views, needs and understandings of Unisa staff on this dual MEd in ODL (i.e. between Unisa and UMUC), which have not been described previously. Experiences of students who study online are widely described in the ODL literature internationally, but no reference is made to dual university initiatives. Furthermore, student experiences with specific reference to online MEd in

ODL are not clearly described in the literature. Lastly, Unisa needs the experiences and views of online students to inform the online learning in future.

The research question that resulted from this problem statement and was thus addressed is stated as follows:

What are Unisa staff online learning experiences, views, needs and understandings of the MEd in ODL offered by Unisa and UMUC?

1.3 Purpose

Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore the variation of online learning experiences, views, needs and understandings through a phenomenographic study of academics on the MEd in ODL at Unisa during 2012-2015. The resultant research objective from this purpose is stated as follows:

1.3.1 Objective

To qualitatively explore the online learning experiences, views, needs and understanding of Unisa staff on the MEd in ODL offered by Unisa and UMUC during 2012-2015, through a qualitative phenomenography.

1.4 Significance of the study

The significance of this study is paramount, as it contributes valuable insight into the successful implementation of technology as a teaching strategy for online learning in the MEd in ODL at an ODL institution such as Unisa. Furthermore, there is a great need for ODL practitioners in South Africa and in Africa to be developed on improved teaching models in technology enhanced learning. This study also sheds light on the participants' online learning experiences, views, needs and understanding in the MEd in ODL programme, which should help guide similar programmes.

It is increasingly becoming important for ODL practitioners, academics and support staff at ODL institutions to be able to use teaching models suitable for online learning. The recommendations

made at the end of this study can contribute towards the existing models and the designing of new effective models. In addition, there is a need for ODL staff to have knowledge and skills on good practices in online learning, so as to ensure student success and throughput in higher education. It is evident, that the academic staff and others need insight and theory toward the successful implementation of technology for the digital age. The findings from the participants' experiences are crucial in this regard.

1.5 Limitations of the study

The first limitation was that it was not easy to secure an appointment for the face-to-face interviews with Unisa staff. This caused the re-strategising, (i.e. to resort to e-mail-based interview) by sending the interview guide to each participant to fill it. But this led to another limitation which is about missing out on the probing opportunity. The related limitation is that in certain instances the participants did not provide as much information as possible, as desired. Further limitations which surfaced during the investigation have been detailed in Chapter Five.

1.6 Delimitations of the study

This study faced a few delimitations. Firstly, the study focused on Unisa context only. Secondly, the study targeted only Unisa staff who were enrolled in the MEd in ODL programme between 2012 and 2015. Thirdly, due to its limited scope and qualitative nature, only seven participants were involved in the study through interviews pending saturation.

1.7 Definition of key terms

The terms that are very important for this study are experiences, online learning, e-learning, open and distance learning and distance education. These are defined subsequently.

1.7.1 Online learning

Online learning is a form of flexible learning which uses technologies in particular contexts (National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) 2005:1; Naidu 2006:1; Ally 2008:16; Higher Education Authority (HEA) 2009:2). Michigan Department of Education (2014:1) defines online learning as “a structured learning activity that utilises technology with intranet/internet-based tools and resources as the delivery method for instruction, research,

assessment, and communication”. The teacher and the learner are at all or mostly not bound by space and time (HEA 2009:2). Council on Higher Education (CHE) (2014:10) concurs that:

there is no physical face-to-face component although there could be a virtual face-to-face component. All interactions with staff and students, educational content, learning activities, assessment and support services are integrated and take place online.

Another definition that is very close to the CHE’s, is that by Ally (2008:5), who defines online learning as:

the use of the Internet to access learning materials; to interact with the content, instructor, and other learners; and to obtain support during the learning process, in order to acquire knowledge, to construct personal meaning, and to grow from the learning experience.

In the light of these definitions in this study, online learning means the use of the internet for purposes of learning and service received about learning (i.e. interaction with staff and students, educational content, learning activities, assessment and support services, in almost or non-face-to-face mode). The definitions attached to this concept are crucial in this study to map out the varied experiences of MEd in ODL students’ learning online.

1.7.2 E-learning

The term *e-learning* was defined because this study discussed issues related to it as well; also, the name of the qualification (Certificate in Distance Education and E-Learning) for this MEd in ODL’s coursework component which is offered by UMUC, incorporates the term e-learning. According to Epignosis LLC’s (2014:5-11) definition, computer is the central enabler of e-learning. In this sense, e-learning is a computer-based educational tool or system that enables the learner to learn anywhere and at any time, and that currently, e-learning is mostly delivered through internet (Epignosis LLC, 2014:5-11). According to Naidu (2006:11):

As the letter “e” in e-learning stands for the word “electronic”, e-learning would incorporate all educational activities that are carried out by individuals or groups working online or offline, and synchronously or asynchronously via networked or standalone computers and other electronic devices.

E-learning is generally perceived as being ICT reliant (Knightly, 2007:267). But, according to Minnaar (2011:483):

E-learning includes the use of the internet for accessing learning materials, interacting with learning content and with instructors and students to obtain support during the learning process in order to gain knowledge and personal meaning and to grow. It occurs when students have electronic access to resources and where they are in regular online contact with their peers and tutors.

There are varieties of e-learning such as standalone courses which are self-paced without a student interacting with the teacher. E-learning could include learning games and simulations by performing simulated activities that require exploration. Next, mobile learning is learning while moving around the world and is aided by mobile devices such as smart phones or tablets (Epignosis LLC 2014:5-11). Social learning happens through interaction with communities of experts or fellow students and relies on social networking media such as online discussions, blogging and text-messaging.

Mobile learning is not yet clearly defined in education. It includes the idea that it will support a wide variety of conceptions of teaching, and the idea that it is uniquely placed to support learning that is personalised, authentic and situated (Traxler 2007:17). However, in higher education, mobile education must be innovative, technically feasible and pedagogically sound (Traxler 2007:17). Furthermore, mobile learning in higher education must address social, cultural and organisational factors (Traxler 2007:17).

E-learning is particularly of interest in this study alongside online learning. The object of learning, e.g. materials, assessment, discussions, etc, happen between students and lecturers (supervisors) and among students via the online/e-learning mode. The concept illuminated the

varied experiences, understandings and needs of MEd in ODL students' in as far as the use of e-technology for learning vis-à-vis issues of access, availability, user-friendliness, etc of the technology which could impact on their learning. Ally and Minnaar define online learning and e-learning to mean almost the same thing. Their definitions are thus important and thus helped in this study to explore scholarly literature under both terms.

1.7.3 Experiences

Experience is when one, in this case a student, engages in an activity and makes meaning of such activity. Abbiss (2006) provides an information technology-based example of this definition by stating that students' activities in computers and the understanding that they derive of these activities define their experiences. Experiences can be positive or negative because they reflect attitudinal factors related to things such as likes, dislikes, self-confidence or self-efficacy and ideas about the worth of a course (Abbiss 2006:34). This is one of the central concepts in this study which is used as a springboard to reveal the students' varied experiences in relation to the learning object and the online learning platform.

1.7.4 Open and distance learning (ODL)

It is not easy to define ODL; some scholars think of it being synonymous with distance education and thus use the terms interchangeably, some think distance education is a sub-category of open learning, whereas some claim no synonymy between the two terms (Islam & Ferdowsi 2014:176). Commonwealth of Learning (CoL) & Asian Development Bank (1999) and Mswela (2012) define ODL through its characteristics. Specifically, CoL and Asian Development Bank (1999:3) state the following characteristics of ODL:

- Separation of teacher and learner expressed in time or place, or in both time and place.
- Institutional accreditation in which learning is accredited or certified by some institution or agency.
- Use of mixed-media courseware such as print, radio, television broadcast, video and audio means, computer-based learning and telecommunication.
- Two-way communication in which the teacher and learner can interact and communicate synchronously or asynchronously.

- Possibility of face-to-face meeting for tutorials, learner-learner interaction, library study, laboratory or even practice sessions.
- Adoption of industrialised model in which labour is divided and tasks are assigned various staff who work together in course development teams.

These characteristics are deemed important in this study because they provide an understanding about students' varied experiences of the service they receive from their lecturers online – support, visibility, accessibility, etc. In turn also, as these students participating in the MEd in ODL are employees who operate in an ODL context, and thus the programme is meant to enhance their knowledge and skills in that regard, this study helped to create an understanding about how they service the Unisa community, after being trained in the programme.

But CoL (2015:3) also provides a specific definition of ODL, i.e. it means:

a system of teaching and learning characterised by separation of teacher and learner in time and /or place; uses multiple media for delivery of instruction; involves two-way communication and occasional face-to-face meeting for tutorial and learner-learner interaction.

However, Islam and Ferdowsi (2014:176) define open learning as including:

the notions of both openness and flexibility (whereby students have personal autonomy over their studies and where access restrictions and privileges have been removed) and distance (as in independence from the teacher).

The above characteristics apply to a greater extent to the understanding of ODL in this study.

In the context of Unisa's ODL Research Framework and Plan (2012:6) and ODL Policy (2008:2), ODL is defined as:

a multi-dimensional concept aimed at bridging the time, geographical, economic, social, educational and communication distance between student and institution,

student and academics, student and courseware and student and peers. Open distance learning focuses on removing barriers to access learning, flexibility of learning provision, student-centeredness, supporting students and constructing learning programmes with the expectation that students can succeed.

1.7.5 Distance education

The term distance education means the education mode opted for by students who for some reasons find it challenging to attend face-to-face institutions, but study at home (Modestro & Tau, sa). The reasons can include family related commitments, work, distance and so on. As such, distance education affords these students an option to engage in independent learning through self-study texts and non-contiguous communication (Islam & Ferdowsi 2014:176). According to Keegan (1990:44; 1996:44), Gungor and Prince (2011), Moore, Dickson-Deanne and Galyen (2011:129-130), backed by Islam and Ferdowsi (2014:176), distance education is characterised by aspects such as the following:

- Separation of the student and the teacher by physical distance.
- Influence of educational organisation which distinguishes distance education from private study.
- Use of technical media such as print, audio and social network media.
- Provision of a two-way communication enabled by these technical media.
- Occasional meetings for purposes of interaction may not be ruled out.
- Student's involvement is predominantly self-directed.

The importance of this concept is similar to that in 1.7.4 because the two are closely related in meaning and application.

1.7.6 Phenomenography

Phenomenography is a fairly recently contribution in qualitative research methodology. According to Larsson and Holmström (2007:56), this method was developed from an empirical educational framework by Ference Marton and co-workers in Sweden in the 1970s. Etymologically, phenomenography is derived from the two Greek words, which are “phainomenon” for appearance, and “graphein” for description (Larsson & Holmström 2007:56;

Khan 2014:34). This means that phenomenography is about the description of appearances. As a qualitative research design, phenomenography means to find out research participants' experiences of the world categorised in terms of descriptions (Larsson & Holmström 2007:56; Khan 2014:34). An important defining characteristic of this research design is the varied ways in which people experience, conceptualise, perceive and understand the phenomena in the world (Khan 2014:34). Its meaning is also expressed through its aim: Phenomenographers aim for qualitatively different but logically interconnected conceptions or understandings which a group of people endure for a particular context (Khan 2014:35). This design was predominantly used in health services research, but a phenomenographic theory of learning and awareness was introduced in education subsequently (Larsson & Holmström 2007:56). Unlike phenomenology, phenomenography is not directed at the phenomenon per se, but at the varied understandings and experiences of people of a phenomenon (Larsson & Holmström 2007:56).

1.7.7 Variation theory

Marton's and Booth's Variation theory owes its origin to the phenomenographic research tradition (Marton & Booth 1997; Marton 2000; Marton, Runesson & Tsui 2003:16; Suhonen, Thompson, Davies & Kinshuk 2008; Tong 2012:3). This theory claims that there is no single way to understand, experience or think about a particular phenomenon because there is considerable variation in people in people's discernment (Tong 2012:3). Indeed, in a learning situation students conceive of the object of learning in varied ways based on their existing understandings and frameworks of knowledge. Thus, variation theory stresses learning as a change of experiencing and understanding the object of learning. It (i.e. variation theory) focuses on the object of learning (i.e. what is to be learned) and the ability to discern certain critical features of the phenomenon that one previously did not focus on or took for granted (Marton et al 2003:16). This requires teachers to be aware of these variations so that they can design learning opportunities for their students to interact meaningfully with the object of learning. Therefore, it was valid and useful alongside phenomenography which was used in this study.

Defined this way, variation theory is deemed important in this study because it helped to reveal the varied experiences, understandings and needs of the MEd students, which can inform the future structuring of the MEd in ODL by Unisa (and its coursework by UMUC), especially with regard to how learning is packaged and approached by the two institutions.

These last two concepts anchor (frame) this study in terms of the variation which was sought of the MEd in ODL students' understandings, experiences and needs as it regards their online learning.

1.8 Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the research problem on MEd students' online experiences in an ODL higher education context. The specific research question in tandem with the identified research problem and objective were stated. The chapter has also delimited the study and drawn limitations. Important concepts that guide the study were defined. Indications of the research method, phenomenography, and variation theory were also given. Before presenting Chapter Two, it was deemed it important to briefly outline each chapter of this dissertation in Section 1.9.

1.9 Chapter outline

This is a limited scope dissertation which reports a research study in five chapters. Each chapter contains three main sections, namely, the introduction, (i.e. where the discussion on what the chapter entailed, the body (i.e. in which issues were discussed and explored), and lastly the conclusion, (i.e. where chapter in summary format and the links towards the next chapter were described). However, Chapter One ends with the brief outline and organisation of the study.

Chapter One: This chapter provided the background, the research problem and purpose, and ultimately defined important concepts for the study.

Chapter Two: In this chapter the scholarly discourses surrounding online learning in respect to student experiences were discussed and were backed with the conceptual framework.

Chapter Three: The research methods used from the selection of participants through data analysis under phenomenographic research design were detailed.

Chapter Four: This chapter presented the findings of the study.

Chapter Five: This chapter concluded the study by summarising the discussions, concluding the study and making the relevant recommendations about the MEd in ODL.

Chapter Two

Literature review: Online student experiences

2.1 Introduction

This chapter responds to the research question on the experiences of participants enrolled for the MEd in ODL at Unisa and UMUC. The chapter presents the surveyed scholarly literature on students' experiences of studying online. It forms the basis for empirical inquiry and findings presented in the next two chapters respectively. A detailed discussion is dedicated to the online learning and research findings about students' experiences of online learning, because that was the main interest of investigation in this study. This discussion happens under the conceptual framework which framed the study.

2.2 Online learning

When one considers ODL and Distance Education (DE) as defined in 1.7.4 and 1.7.5 respectively, it comes to mind that these education delivery modes are unavoidably affected by the fast developments in technology. Therefore, ODL institutions such as Unisa regard online learning as an effective way to deliver education to students. Online learning is a form of DE (which spans over a period of two centuries), which has a history of access that began in the 1980s (Moore, Dickson-Deane & Galyen 2011:129) alongside e-learning, which “has gained traction in educational settings in recent years” (Calli, Balcikanli, Calli, Cebeci & Seymen 2013:85). However, ODL institutions have to ensure capacitating their staff in online learning in order for them to service students via online teaching and learning.

UMUC is a United States-based institution, which means that the teaching and learning of Unisa staff happens over a distance just as the Unisa component of the programme happens over a distance. DE is “characterised by teaching and learning brought about by media – students and their teachers do not meet face to face” (Holmberg 1989:9). Holmberg (2008:9) uses the phrase mediated teaching and learning in the furtherance of this explanation. He claims that one or more media such as the printed media and written word, audio and video recordings, telephone

conversations and computer communication are used for the student interaction and for communicating the subject matter. However, UMUC uses the online (and e-learning) platform and tools, WebCT (lately changed to LEO) to service its students. Moreover, this mode of teaching is deemed suitable to train the Unisa academic staff due to their work related commitments and to ensure the desired empowerment in the use of these online tools and platforms to service their students in turn.

While ODL is a choice for students who cannot or who do not want to learn through classroom attendance (Islam & Ferdowsi 2014:176), it also places certain demands on them. According to Islam and Ferdowsi (2014:176) and Holmberg (1989:24), professional and family or other responsibilities deny many adults the opportunity to attend the conventional, full-time, face-to-face classes which are characterised by fixed timetabling. To students who are affected this way, ODL is accessible, convenient, flexible and adaptable. However, cut-off dates for assignments, learning content, materials and methods being rigid, structures which are inflexible, failure to offer dialogue like face-to-face can, and the student's isolation and individualisation (Islam & Ferdowsi 2014:177) impact on students learning.

2.3 Student orientation into the programme

Students' orientation about online courses is reportedly an under-researched area (Gullixon 2010:7-9; Melick 2014:9-10; Wozniak, Pizzica & Mahony 2012:896). This study contributes to the body of research lacking in this aspect, that is, by researching South African students' (Unisa academics') online learning experiences with UMUC and Unisa. In order to understand the fundamental need for the orientation of students who learn via online it is important to briefly outline the characteristics of such students. Lethbridge College in Canada noticed the importance of orientation that students may need prior to starting with their online learning. The college therefore produced *Online Student Orientation Handbook*, that informs students about learning online and the programme. Among other things, the college informs the students about important characteristics of being an online student. Thus, according to Lethbridge College (2013:7), ideal online students:

- are flexible in their learning styles so that they can comfortably attend to their other areas of life;
- have a personal computer and preferably their own email addresses;
- have a beginner's basic capacity to operate a computer, otherwise the willingness to learn the use of technology for purposes of their learning and work may be negatively affected;
- are free to ask questions as and when they need further clarification;
- dedicate time to their learning as per the requirements of the course or courses they enrolled for;
- understand the demands of an online course just like there are with a traditional face-to-face class;
- are organised, goal-orientated, disciplined and self-directed in their own learning;
- effectively and carefully manage their time given their other responsibilities;
- have good self-expression and fluency in their writing;
- express love for learning, criticality and independence in exploring solutions to problems; and
- enjoy to interact with other students in online discussions through the use of technology.

These characteristics suggest that in order to enable online students to cope with the demands of the programme and the systems of online technologies there should be an organised orientation for them. Students' orientation cannot be undermined in accordance with Borzath, Chapman and LaMonica (2004:87) and Kelly (2013:461). A group of four students was assigned to carry out a project aimed at designing an online orientation course. The course was meant to be a requirement for an advanced instructional design course for new online students at North Carolina State University (Borzath et al., 2004:87). The intended outcome of the project "was to be a pre-requisite course to prepare new students for the online educational environment" (Borzath et al., 2004:87). Such orientation covers quite a lot of things, from registration to academic activities similar to those encapsulated in the *Online Student Orientation Handbook* by Lethbridge College (2013:4-46).

The last ten years or so has been characterised by a remarkable growth of online learning, but student retention has been much lower compared to the traditional face-to-face learning (Britto &

Rush 2013:29; Jones 2013:43). Jones (2013:43) has identified an ineffective approach by the Richland Community College in USA, to orientate its students as being attributed to such low retention. For the first ten years of the course the college orientated the students face-to-face through the traditional method of the lecturer presenting from the front with computers which had a high speed internet. After the orientation the students experienced some confusion in their attempts to complete their online coursework from home mainly because of technical problems such as, their computers lacked the correct software and were not set-up correctly (Jones 2013:44). In her study, *Developing and Implementing a Mandatory Online Student Orientation*, Jones (2013:43) reports the efforts taken by a rural community college to evaluate its procedures about orientating students for online courses in which the college realised that the students' needs were not met. For academic challenges, the college then developed the ADDIE (analysis, design, development, implement and evaluate) model adopted from Moore and Kearsley (2005) (also see Allen, 2006), as a response to this problem and made the orientation mandatory from then. The students were asked about their experiences after this change had been implemented. The students felt better prepared through the developed orientation programme and student retention increased ultimately. Thus, this attests to the importance of orientation for students who have registered for online learning.

In South Africa, especially in the ODL higher education context, one of the factors which impact negatively on students' success appears to be their unpreparedness for the rigorous higher education standards (Coetzee & Oosthuizen 2012:315). Increasing student retention and success rates are key challenges (Strydom, Kuh & Mentz 2010; Prinsloo & Subotzky 2011). College of Economic and Management Sciences at Unisa embarked on a study, *Students' Perceptions of the Quality of Learner Support in ODL* after CHE had raised concern about the quality of ODL in South Africa (Oosthuizen, Loedolff & Hamman 2010:186). The results of the study indicated differences of perceptions on administrative support, learner support area, support from Unisa, etc., which were informed by the students' age groups, geographical regions (provinces), gender and academic department concerned (Oosthuizen et al. 2010:186, 203). Students need to be supported right from when they enter into the programme.

2.4 Conceptual framework

This section presents discussions from the scholarly literature on the concepts which framed the study. These are student participation and collaboration in online activities, assessment and grading, motivation, co-constructing knowledge and use of social media blends.

2.4.1 Participating and collaborating in online activities

Going through the work via online learning entails participation in online discussions, that is, posting a theme by the instructor/lecturer to direct the discussion to which students respond by posting their original contributions and also responding to other students' postings (Government Accountability Office (GAO) 2011)). GAO (2011:10) in USA lists assignments in the form of essays of varying lengths, skills exercises, multiple-choice quizzes and examinations as other ways through which students can participate. In the case of Unisa staff on the MEd in ODL, online discussions with weekly themes and grading, completing individual and group assignments were used for online learning, thus showing some similarities with the list provided above. Thus, taking an online course can provide educational experiences to students that would otherwise be unavailable (Steinman 2007:46).

Shackelford and Maxwell (2012) conducted a survey to explore the types of student-student interactions, from nine targeted ones, which are predictive of students' sense of community in online graduate courses at a regional comprehensive USA-based university. Those interactions which were most predictive of a sense of community were introductions, collaborative group projects, sharing personal experiences, entire class discussions and exchanging resources. The instructors (lecturers) also benefited a great deal from exchanging resources. The findings suggested that interaction was encouraged not only among students but also between students and their instructors.

In Canada, it was found that online learning provides benefits to students in the sense that they can:

- cooperatively engage in the course;

- actively participate in reflective discussions about the course material;
- increase their participation due to plenty of time that they have for reading, writing and posting in discussion forums; and
- promote critical thinking that can earn them higher achievement and collaborative learning and social system

(Zhang & Kelly 2010:18).

Students' participation is basically manoeuvred through computer-mediated communication (CMC) and juggling personal commitments to manage time conflicts and to access course materials from a variety of locations (Zhang & Kelly 2010:17). It is also argued that collaborative learning in online learning environment depends on the instructor (lecturer) creating an appropriate context for it (collaborative learning). CMC enables people to create, exchange and perceive information through using network communication (December 2015). Fetzner (2013:13) reports on a study conducted at Monroe Community College (MCC) in USA in which three online learning students were asked to:

share their perspectives on why they felt that they were not successful in their online class; comment on their expectations for online classes; and share the advice that they would give to a student who was considering taking an online MCC class.

The prominent reason cited by students to the question why they felt that they were unsuccessful in an online course was that they lacked behind and found it difficult to catch up in their programme (Fetzner 2013:13). This implies that students can be overwhelmed by their online learning activities to a point of non-participation. As it has been indicated in 2.3, proper orientation of students into the programme could help them to plan their time and academic activities better to prevent them from lacking behind. Students would know what and how much is expected of them in terms of their learning activities.

2.4.2 Assessment and grading

Online learning can yield both positive experiences and those that constrain students' learning which are related to the way students are assessed. In a study conducted at 15 colleges in USA on students who were enrolled at these colleges one college awarded a student a failing grade in an assignment due to a technological failure which prevented the instructor from seeing the student's correctly submitted assignment (GAO 2011:11). When the student contacted the instructor about this discrepancy the instructor re-graded all affected assignments and provided new feedback. Therefore, assessment was viewed as a problem area in online learning (GAO 2011:11). It then becomes crucial for the lecturers to be very vigilant about students' submitted work online (i.e. so that they can prevent mishaps such one explained here). Students could be failed because of lecturers' lack of enough vigilance, not that students did not submit the work.

Arend (2007:3) asserts that course assessment seems to be the most understudied aspect of online education even though it has an impact on learning. This study makes a contribution to the scarce body of knowledge on this aspect, in the context of Unisa staff enrolled in the MEd in ODL. The absence of physical space and face-to-face contact between the instructor and student makes online learning different from the conventional face-to-face learning (Arend 2007:3; Abedi 2015:3). However, the teacher-student and student-student interaction are essential for assessment (Abedi 2015:2) in an online learning environment where feedback is mostly provided promptly. From a student-centred approach and self-progressiveness perspective at the University of Denver in USA (Abedi 2015:2), students are mostly graded according to their assignments, quizzes, papers, tests, group projects, discussion contributions, online educational games, reflections and visual representations (Arend 2007:3). But the most common grading that students get is for their participation in the learning activities (Arend 2007:3), not the quality of their work. While this assessment practice can be viewed as rewarding students' participation, it is a very superficial way of grading students. The focus is only on whether the student participated or the extent to which he/she participated, not what the student has contributed.

2.4.3 Being motivated

Perseverance in an online course depends on students experiencing the offering in such a way that they are motivated. The disjuncture between lecturers' and students' expectations is one

such factor that can hamper students' performance and discourage them at a Midwestern university in USA (Zimmerman, Schmidt, Becker, Peterson, Nyland & Surdick 2014:3). Minnaar (2011:483) identified three issues that bother students learning online in her metasynthesis, that is, technical problems (infrastructure and access), panic attack (pedagogy) and human contact (human factor), that could impact student motivation globally.

Online learning environment can also impact student motivation. Zhang and Kelly (2010) conducted a case study to explore the learning experiences of three international students who were enrolled in an online master's programme offered by a large university in Canada. The purpose of the study was to understand these students' experiences with and perspectives on online learning environment. Data were collected through online survey, online observation, e-mail interviews and telephonic interviews. These authors found out that the students' previous education and especially language proficiency strongly impacted them to learn through the online learning this environment – non-English speakers required more time to process readings and postings and to make postings themselves. The difference in their and the institution's cultural context posed challenges to them to follow much of the course discussions. They tended to avoid socialising in the course, thus impacting their motivation. The authors made some recommendations for designers and instructors of online courses – raise the English language proficiency requirement for graduate admissions into online programmes, ensure that online distance education course designers are aware of the needs and expectations of international students, combine design principles from both traditional and constructivist theories. Likewise, distance education (with or without technology enhanced learning), experienced the same problems such as student support, quality tutors and access to resources.

In yet another recent study, Islam and Ferdowsi (2014) surveyed perceptions of 22 students of MEd in Distance Learning from Bangladesh Open University's nine tutorial centres. The purpose of the study was:

to locate the aims and philosophies of distance learning within the experiences of actual distance learners in order to see if learners' needs were being met by the

program and to obtain a fuller understanding of core aspects of distance education
(Islam & Ferdowsi 2014:10).

The findings of the study revealed students' satisfaction with the course materials, choice of modules, feedback on assignments and duration to complete them. The findings further revealed students' dissatisfaction with student support in terms of quality and tutorship and access to and provision of resource materials in terms of their access and availability (also confirmed by Gurbuz 2014:239).

CMC avails a learning platform characterised by both asynchronous and synchronous digital spaces, which lecturers and students can manipulate in complex ways. However, Zhang and Kelly (2010:18) note that the complexities of these digital spaces may impact negatively on the students – they may feel lonely or stressed due to information overload, and that they do not receive a prompt response to their postings or are confronted by too many postings more than they can handle. Thus, the complexity of digital spaces could demotivate students' perseverance with regard to their online academic activities especially if they have not been orientated into those spaces.

2.4.4 Co-constructing knowledge

Burton and Goldsmith (2002:7-9) studied the online interaction of 75 students in 11 public and private institutions in USA, who participated in the asynchronous focus group. The purpose of their study was to better understand the way these students approached web-based learning and how this approach changed with greater experience in online courses. The most important themes that emerged from the study were: the role of faculty in facilitating successful online courses through effective communication with their students, presence online, and timely assessment of student work throughout the course. Other factors included the importance of flexibility in online courses such that students own their learning, the discipline necessary to be successful in online courses, the importance of communication among students as a means to enhance online learning environment and also the importance of student support systems to foster a positive online learning experience and autonomy. Students' motivation may be dampened by lecturers owning the course and everything about it, thus limiting the students'

active participation in the course (Burton & Goldsmith 2002:7). By lecturers owning the course I mean lecturer-centred facilitation style where they limit students' participation. According to Wozniak et al (2012:907), lecturers who dominate subjects hamper students' ownership of learning. This ownership by the lecturers impacts negatively on students' construction of knowledge and indicates a gap between online learning and constructivism. Constructivism is a key pedagogy in online learning, and forms the foundation for effective online collaborative learning.

Therefore, learning has a great potential to promote construction of knowledge (Zhu 2012:127). According to Peters (2002:47), in recent years the construction of knowledge by students has strongly influenced online education, thus converting a much teacher-controlled teaching to a learner-controlled one. This suggests the creation of an environment for student autonomy and initiative as it is informed by the cultural and social context of the learning situation, as well as students' beliefs and attitudes. In the Australian academic context, the design models of online learning programmes have been found to be the products of particular cultures, as a result they were not culturally neutral (McLoughlin & Oliver 2000). Such models might be limited in fully contextualising students' learning experiences (McLoughlin & Oliver 2000), thus closing down on students' freedom to construct their knowledge. Students who are uncertain of their communication, those raised in cultures where social presence is over-emphasised, language barrier, institutional culture offering the course (Zhang & Kelly 2010:20) will be affected differently in terms of their participation in co-construction of knowledge.

Co-construction of knowledge is an aspect of interpretivism, an approach which focuses on the meanings of people's character as well as their taking part in social and cultural life (Kelliher 2005:123; Goldkuhl 2012:5; Chowdhury 2014:433). The essentiality of interpretivism lies in an attempt to understand the meanings projected by persons in studied domains (Goldkuhl 2012:4), and that is basically about observing them constructing knowledge and meanings. Thus, my interest in the MEd in ODL, as a researcher, was to explore the meanings and motives, views and experiences of participants in the programme (Chowdhury 2014:433). This interest extended to establishing the experiences, needs and views of participants in the MEd in ODL regarding constructivism.

Vygotsky (1978) (in Subban 2006) has influenced instructional approaches supporting student-focused learning environments. Vygotsky (in Subban 2006) and others, support learning that is enriched by collaborative and learner engaged approaches. Students who are engaged in collaborative learning conditions experience more constructive learning processes (Zhu 2012:128). Vygotsky (1978) in Conrad and Donaldson (2012:4-5), introduced the concept of zone of proximal development which enforces the belief that individual learning can be expanded with assistance and interaction with a more knowledgeable individual such as a mentoring-learning relationship. Vygotsky's (1978) theory raises a need on the part of the teacher to cater for the students' diverse learning styles in a sociocultural context (Subban 2006:936) that online learning has to offer. In the South African context these diverse learning styles and context are quite crucial due to technological issues of access to internet, broadband, connectivity, and the sociocultural nature of the learners and their geographical locations (CHE 2014). Broadband is "high-speed internet access which is always on and capable of multiple service provision simultaneously" (Broadband Commission 2014:16).

According to Shackelford and Maxwell (2012:230), constructivism presents three elements to ensure student interaction, which are cognitive, social and teaching presences. Cognitive presence is about students' ability to construct meaning through sustained communication in the learning community context (Shackelford & Maxwell 2012:230). Cognitive presence is ensured through students' collaboration as they explore, construct, resolve and confirm their understanding of the content (Garrison in Shackelford & Maxwell 2012:230; CHE 2014). Social presence is the ability of students to project themselves socially and emotionally through communication (Shackelford & Maxwell 2012:230). For cognitive and social presences to materialise teaching presence is crucial, which is about the teacher's ability to project himself or herself in online courses (Swan 2003:24) through course design and organisation, discourse facilitation and direct instruction (Shackelford & Maxwell 2012:230). CHE (2014:8-9) cautions that the choice of technologies for resourcing and programme delivery in the South African context should be carefully thought.

The importance of constructivism in an online learning environment or module is informed by interactive technologies, which can promote the collaboration and construction of knowledge (Zhu 2012:127; CHE 2014). The crux of the matter is to provide space for students, so as to co-construct knowledge especially in an asynchronous collaborative and discussion environment that online educational technologies can provide. Construction of knowledge by students can be seen as the main aspect (Zhu 2012; CHE 2014) shaping the experiences of learners. Computer-supported collaborative learning in which students are partners with one another and their instructors (Zhu 2012) enables this co-construction of knowledge. Zhu (2012:128) opines that:

In online learning communities, students can create, share information, practice critical reflection, negotiate meaning, test synthesis, and build consensus. Through online, collaborative written assignments, group discussions, debates and critiques of arguments and reflective writing students can enhance knowledge construction.

These activities directly implicate active learning, which is the crucial aspect that is promoted by constructivism (Zhu 2012; Koohang, Kohun, Morris & DeLorenzo 2013). An added dimension to the online sociocultural interaction is the role that culture plays in the interpretation of the interactions and construction of meaning (Zhu 2012:127) as stated above. Zhu (2012:127) declares in this instance, that “cultural attributes can affect online presence and learner perceptions”. It is thus crucial to take into cognisance the students’ cultural background in an online learning as it affects the way they respond to such learning (McLoughlin & Oliver 2000; Zhu 2012; CHE 2014). Hence, the interest in this study was about inquiring into the experiences of the online MEd students from a South African cultural context but receiving their online education first from the US-based UMUC and later on at Unisa. Different attitudes may have been exhibited by these students as informed by their cultural context vis-a-vis the online educational intervention provided in another cultural context (Zhu 2012:128), that is, US context. Hence, the need to gather their experiences in this study.

Sociocultural interaction attracts connectivism, which is directly related to constructivism. Connectivism was recently introduced by George Siemens, Stephan Downs and Peter Tittenberger (2009). Connectivism describes how learning happens in a digital age. It is about

the view that knowledge and cognition are distributed across networks of people and technology, and that learning is connected and grows and is emergent and shapes networks (Siemens et al. 2009: 11-12).

Unisa-based participants in the study could share their experiences in terms of how they attempted to construct knowledge and made meaning of the online learning programme (i.e. MEd in ODL). They co-participated with other students and instructors from around the world during the UMUC coursework modules and with each other during the Unisa component.

2.4.5 Use of social media blends

According to Abel, Brown and Suess (2013), higher education is entering a period in which connections enabled by information technology, social media and mobile devices between everything and everyone are important. In this sense, from a student perspective, an array of personal connections, resources and collaboration can be integrated. On the other hand, from the educator (designer) perspective, a number of options have been made available by these tools, which include planning, designing and executing of a course to connect with and support students.

Web 2.0 tools have an emerging role to transform teaching and learning to benefit especially students who learn online. Alexander and Levine (2008:41) define Web 2.0 as “the social use of the Web which allows people to collaborate, to be actively involved in creating content, to generate knowledge and to share information online”. Alexander and Levine (2008) note these technologies’ educational value to the user: they provide quick feedback to students, students use peer networks to develop their own knowledge, teachers can update new information such as homework and assignments, comments in blogs encourage students to help each other with their work, they inspire writing and creativity and students can create presentations using photos, and resources can be accessed anywhere any time on any internet-connected computer. Zhang and Kelly (2010:20) add flexibility, quantity and quality of participation, open and accessible communication and archived postings from participants for reference (also see Calli *et al.* 2013:86).

According to Goold, Craig and Coldwell (2008), the online environment has multiple support tools which include document sharing, asynchronous discussion forums, real-time multimedia collaboration, synchronous chat, Wikis, Blogs, media repositories, e-mail and virtual learning environment. Adult learners, particularly through online learning, can acquire generic skills which can be transferred to their workplaces, for instance using online learning portfolios (Knightly 2007:267).

The discussion of the scholarly literature which was consulted and discussed reveal the complexities of online learning. These complexities show up right from the moment students are orientated into the programme and the online technological space (CMC) that they should operate in, through their actual learning activities and assessment. The findings of the literature reveal the importance of orientating students properly into learning online, failing which they may experience challenges which may impact on their learning progress. Instructors or lecturers should also make effort to provide the online atmosphere which will allow students space to co-construct knowledge in an iterative manner among themselves and with the object of learning. That will go a long way to keep students motivated.

2.5 Conclusion

Online learning presents varied experiences to students in a number of ways, for example, students' participation in the learning activities, assessment, etc. An attempt has been made in this chapter to present the scholarly work that accounts for these experiences. It can be realised that while online learning is a choice for many students due to convenience provided by the online technological tools and internet, it also presents dynamic challenges that are accounted for in the literature. Thus, it was important to conduct a study such as this, which researched students' experiences of online learning in contexts where scanty research was previously done. The next chapter details the phenomenographic methods that were applied in this research study.

Chapter Three

Methodology of the study

3.1 Introduction

This chapter explains and motivates the research design for the study and the methods for data gathering and analysis that were used to help provide answers to the research question: *What are Unisa staff online learning experiences, views, needs and understandings of the MEd in ODL offered by Unisa and UMUC?* The chapter further accounts for the trustworthiness of the study and issues pertaining to the research ethics.

3.2 Research methods

This section details the methods of data gathering down to data analysis. The decisions and choices made about this are substantiated with the relevant literature. Most importantly is a detailed account of the execution of these decisions and choices and the way they were modified by the circumstances in the field.

3.2.1 Phenomenography

In this study, phenomenography was used to guide the data gathering methods and procedures. In reference to the variation theory which was defined in 1.7.7, phenomenographic research reveals different ways in which a phenomenon can be experienced, understood or perceived by students and others. Thus, this design is suited to serve under the concept of variation. Phenomenographic research focuses on mapping variations in the experiences (Suhonen, Thompson, Davies & Kinshuk, 2008) and therefore this research used the lens of variation theory to explore participants' experiences, who were enrolled for the MEd in ODL at Unisa and UMUC as a dual degree initiative.

A phenomenographic study is not limited to a dominant paradigm. It investigates the ontological status of a phenomenon. There is no differentiation between the objective real world and subjective experienced world in a phenomenographic study. The subject and the object are linked and not separate, (i.e. they co-exist together). The online learning object co-exist together with the participant (subject in this case). Fruitful conceptions of online learning in the MEd in ODL

are based on differentiation, abstraction, reduction and comparison of meaning, which are the four fundamental principles of phenomenographic analysis (Harris 2008:62).

Phenomenography and variation theory provide a coherent theoretical basis for understanding a threshold concept in terms of identifying what is it that students find troublesome about the concept. Phenomenography is used in qualitative studies to map out varied ways in which people experience, conceptualise, perceive and understand different aspects of the phenomena existent in the surrounding world (Marton, 1986 31). The reason this method was a choice in this study is that the focus was on the participants' experiences of the online MEd in ODL. Phenomenography enables a focus on the participants' experiences (Cope, 2004:7; Boon, Johnston & Webber, 2007:209), which was a matter of engagement in this study.

Marton (2004) in Stamouli and Huggard (2007:181-186) argues that by experiencing variation, aspects that are considered as important in understanding the phenomenon must be clarified, as they signify the differences between the elements. In this study about online learning offered to the MEd in ODL students, students' experiences were investigated using the following main aspects and sub-elements:

a) Main Aspect 1: Experience and understanding

Sub-elements:

- Reasons for doing MEd in ODL,
- Orientation into the programme,
- Shift made towards online learning and transformation,
- Improved understanding of online learning,
- Learning experiences during the programme,
- Change of perception,
- Unique experiences compared to other participants,
- troublesome areas of the programme, and
- assessment.

b) Main Aspect 2: Understanding the object of learning

Sub-elements:

- Critical aspects in the course,
- Variety of teaching methods,
- Motivation to participate in the programme,
- Co-creation of knowledge,
- Owning learning experience,
- Collaborative learning, and
- Active participation.

c) Main Aspect 3: Social media

Sub-elements:

- Social media that participants used in their learning experiences, and
- How the social media transformed participants' approach to work at Unisa.

These aspects yielded variation in how participants experienced the MEd in ODL in the context of online learning.

3.2.2 Participants

This study targeted the Unisa staff who were enrolled in the MEd in ODL in the period 2012-2015. The focus was on participants who had already completed their certificate course or were just about to complete it from UMUC, and who were enrolled for the Unisa component (i.e. ODL5902, ODL5904, MPEDU91 or dissertation), or were just about to enrol for it. Seven participants were selected through purposive selection. Data saturation was prioritised over the number selected in the data gathering process. Purposive selection was suitable for this phenomenographic research because participants were specifically sought out (Boon, Johnston & Webber, 2007:210). It had to be only participants who were enrolled in the programme as described above and specifically between 2012 and 2015.

3.2.3 Selection of participants

The participants described in 3.2.2 were selected by consulting the MEd in ODL's administrative office which is located in the College of Education at Unisa, specifically Department of Curriculum and Instructional Studies. As permission had been granted by Unisa to use the staff in this study and to access information, this Department (i.e. Department of Curriculum and Instructional Studies) provided the list of the staff members enrolled in the programme and their contact information. The list was used to select the participants. This list helped in the sense that one could look for the differences of participants in terms of the biographical information specific to their stage in the programme, gender, age, race, experience of studying online and designation in terms of department/section.

Purposive selection was used and a selection criterion applied by selecting participants who met the criterion, that is, who were enrolled in the MEd in ODL at UMUC and Unisa during 2012 and 2015. The next criterion was that the participants must have completed some of the modules in the course, as indicated in 3.2.2., and female and male participants were included.

Staff members on the MEd in ODL were contacted to take part in the phenomenography. Six participants were interviewed until data saturation was reached, and no new themes emerged. One more interview was done and no new data emerged. In total seven participants on the MEd in ODL were interviewed.

3.2.4 Tools and techniques and their trustworthiness

The above described participants were interviewed individually using a semi-structured interview method. The aspects of experiences mentioned under 3.2.1, bearing in mind variation theory, helped with the design of the interview guide (Appendix A). According to Boon et al (2007:210), this type of interview is suited to phenomenographic research for its nature of questions that encourage participants to unfold their experiences of the given phenomenon. The aim was to probe as much as possible by factoring other questions in the process under each of the main aspects, such as experience and understanding, the object of learning, and social media.

The interview questions were designed in line with the objectives of the study to encourage the participants to share their experiences, views and needs on MEd in ODL. According to Gray (2009:373), semi-structured interviews are non-standardised interviews in which the researcher may have a framework of issues and questions to be covered but to some extent ensures flexibility in question forms and the manner participants address issues. In line with the variation, flexibility was allowed on the way the interviews and participants were approached, so the participants could enjoy the space to flesh out their experiences of online learning. In so doing there was a latitude to change the order and pace of the few questions asked, and to introduce new questions in order to accommodate each participant's unique story and experiences (Flick, 2006).

Regarding pre-testing of the interview process, one of the participants, who was excluded from the main data gathering, was used for pre-testing the interview questions to ensure validity of the interview, and to enable one to modify the questions if there was a need. The purpose for pre-testing the interview was to enhance the trustworthiness of the interview (Kraemer, Mintz, Noda, Tinklenberg & Yesavage, 2006; Nunes, Martins, Zhou, Alajamy & Al-Mamari, 2010; Foster, 2013; Gumbo, 2015). Trustworthiness is the extent to which qualitative data are dependable, consistent, stable, predictable and reliable so that whenever put to test, the same data can be produced (Delpont & Roestenburg, 2011).

This pre-test helped to assess the appropriateness of the interview guide, determine the understanding of the interviewees in relation to the research question and interview items, gain insights into the cultural endowments of participants, obtain additional information to refine the interview instrument, and determine the length of the interview (Welman, Kruger & Mitchell, 2012:167). However, this participant experienced the interview as fair and understandable, and thought that the consent letter clearly explained the purpose of the study and reasons for participation. The interview lasted for about 35 minutes and the recording device worked properly. Therefore, the participant did not suggest any changes to the interview guide. Subsequently, the interview guide was kept accordingly. The trustworthiness was also ensured through member-checking with each participant and triangulation of data gathered from individual participants.

Additionally, trustworthiness was also ensured through data triangulation, (i.e. interview data and data from the participants' postings on Discussion Forum through MyUnisa).

3.2.5 Bracketing

Bracketing is holding in abeyance the researcher's own "repertoires of knowledge, beliefs, values and experiences in order to accurately describe participants' life experiences" (Chan, Fung and Chien, 2013:2). It is a way of demonstrating the validity of data collection and process of analysis (Chan et al., 2013:1). In this study effort was made to bracket preconceptions in order to ensure the validity of the study. The views were thus presented on MEd in ODL in this section. This was done to have a better understanding of how not to cloud the participants' experiences in the study with those of the researcher.

As indicated in this study, one was part of the cohort that was enrolled in the MEd in ODL programme at UMUC and Unisa in 2012-2015. So, views are presented from this experiential perspective. This programme's main objective is to train students in their deep understanding of DE and Web 2.0 technology, that they can use for teaching and learning purposes. The main activities have to do with online participation in discussions with other students and the lecturers giving the course. For Unisa staff, this is a specialised programme which is much needed to train it (i.e. Unisa staff) in the understanding of distance learning and executing its academic duties effectively in the technology enhanced teaching and learning environment. The coursework component completed with UMUC laid the foundation in this regard in the sense that it developed my understanding of distance learning and took me through the practical use of the Web 2.0 technology for purposes of teaching. Although the practical sessions happened remotely within the distance education and/or ODL context, it was how the programme was designed which gave directions on how to access and use this Web 2.0 technology.

Part of the Web 2.0 training was to have knowledge on how to use social media tools for learning. One never thought that one would ever want to experiment with and make use of social media tools such as Facebook, Whatsapp and Twitter, since one counted oneself among the generation that had an attitude towards these tools, without even having tried them first. But this

programme introduced one to them and one experimented with them. One knew the moment when the programme was introduced, that one would be drawn into using these tools. The moment one started their value for learning was realised, for example, one immediately subscribed to ooVoo and Whatsapp and started to chat with colleagues and students about academic matters. The experiences were massive. They included the joys of experimenting with online tools, but also the challenges that came with these joys.

The programme seemed fast-paced in terms of timelines for the readings which had to be covered, and online discussions and assignment deadlines on a weekly basis. There was a lot to read, and to post comments on the readings by also quoting from and providing references as evidence that these readings were consulted. Five marks were given for weekly active participation in terms of the postings and comments on other students' postings. This participation was intensive because it needed one to have consulted the readings for the week and substantiate my postings with the literature and provide references. But grading was felt to be purely the postings, not for the content. The programme was supposed to start with a face-to-face and hands-on orientation into the technological platform used and tools. Students are enrolled in the programme being at their different levels of experience in terms of knowledge and skills for using online technological tools.

The biggest challenge was to start by figuring out how WebCT worked, which was later changed to LEO, and that was another challenging learning platform. One was excited by moments one got something right. At times there was a feeling that other students were advanced with the use of technology tools. That dampened one's courage in the programme to some extent. According to observations during the participation on the discussion platform, some of these students were specialists in e-learning and ICT in general. They knew things. But it was a learning process.

One experienced the lecturers differently in the sense that the first year lecturers were visible and interacting with students a lot, were understanding and supportive. They were flexible about the deadlines of submission of assignments. They provided opportunities to students to improve their assignments especially after the writing coach's comments. They allowed a window period for this improvement. Only after the grade had turned red one could no more be allowed to improve

the assignment. The lecturers for the second and third years were less accommodating and understanding. Assessment was diversified according to group assessment, peer assessment, trials of online tools, etc.

To a greater extent the programme was administered well. There was constant communication between UMUC and students mainly via the instructors. The communication was mainly of an academic nature.

The two Unisa modules were offered through the Discussion Forum on MyUnisa of which one was very familiar with and found very basic. One still had to do a weekly reading and participate with colleagues on the Discussion Forum but that was not as intensive and strict. The programme for the two modules needed to be improved in terms of structured and approach. The dissertation component strictly follows the Unisa's postgraduate system and it was thus familiar and comfortable for me. Finally, one thinks that Unisa staff who qualify in the programme should be better equipped to teach effectively in the ODL technology-enhanced environment. This staff could also venture into ODL research and in the supervision of postgraduate students in line with Unisa's strategic goal on ODL.

3.3 Rigour

Rigour is an important term in research because it accounts for trust of one's research in the eyes of peers and readership. It is synonymous with the validity, or even with quality of research (Melrose, 2001:163-164). It also means precise, accurate, exact, scientific and unerring (Roget, P.M. Roget, J.L. & Roget, S.R. 1980 in Melrose, 2001:164). In this study steps were used to ensure rigour by minimising subjectivity. In this case it was important and difficult not to impose one's views and preconceptions on the data. One was also part of the cohort of MEd in ODL staff at UMUC and Unisa. Therefore, the 'I' had to take special precaution to try to faithfully record and interpret the data in this study. Participant data were not judged against one's values or existing knowledge, although they were compared with the data from the other participants included in this study. Although the three main aspects to guide the interviews were used as stated under 3.2.1, they were not used as codes to explore and analyse the data. Instead the codes

were developed from the transcripts, using the words of the participants. Another step that was taken was to bracket one's own preconceptions regarding online learning.

After several readings of each transcript, words and phrases were marked as issues and facts of interest for this study. Three indicators were used for guidance to guide me with this, such as the frequency of the phrases/issues/words/the position of the statement and it was often found at the beginning of the transcripts. Lastly, one was alert for statements and aspects which were important to the participants and those were marked.

3.4 Ethical consideration and permission

Ethical considerations in this study were approached bearing in mind the fact that obtaining informed consent of the research participants is of paramount importance (Somekh, 2005:60). Jameson and Hiller (2003:83) write that researchers should observe to ensure that research is morally justifiable, beneficial and above all carried out well so that it causes no harm to any one or to anything. Thus, to observe ethical principles and the institutional policies about them, one applied for ethical clearance in the College of Education at Unisa before commencing with the pre-testing and main data collection, since this is in accordance with Unisa's research ethics policy requirements (see Appendix B for Ethics Certificate which was granted). Permission to involve the Unisa staff in the study was also obtained from Unisa's Senate Higher Degrees, Research and Innovation Committee, (i.e. in data collection through interviews) (see Appendix C for permission which was granted). The applications included application forms with attached participants' consent letters and interview schedule.

Informed consent, an essential principle of ethical conduct, was obtained from all the selected participants. This happened after providing the participants with such information as the nature, purpose and procedure of the research, the purpose to which data gathered were put, their role in the study, reason why they were selected, how much of their time was to be taken by their participation in the study, voluntary nature of their participation and their right to withdraw from the research at any given point if they wished to do so (Chilisa & Preece, 2005:23; Gray, 2009; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). The consent letters (Appendix D) spelled out the voluntary participation of the participants, their choice to withdraw from participating in the study

unconditionally, assurance not to use their real names in the study, assurance that the information they gave would be used solely in this study and for publishing the findings ultimately. A section was provided at the end of the consent form for the participants to sign as a way of consenting to participate in the study.

3.5 Procedure for main data collection

After pre-testing the interview guide one was ready to conduct the real interviews with the selected participants. Appointments were made with the participants for the introductions and the brief stating of the purpose of the appointments, (i.e. to interview them, and to send the consent and permission letters to them shortly after making the calls about the appointments). An e-mail was sent to those who could not be found on the phone to communicate details of my request to them. The consent and permission letters were thus attached to the e-mails. But in both modes of communication, the participants' situations caused them to prefer e-mail-based interviews. Their preferences were agreed to.

The participants were asked to be prepared for follow-ups on their responses to the interviews. They were also asked to be as thorough and detailed in their responses. The interviews were conducted between September and November 2015. The fact that this was the examination period at Unisa, it was suspected there was a feeling that it was not a good time to conduct the study. The interview guides were sent to the participants who filled and returned them. Multiple follow-ups were made with some participants. They sent theirs early December 2015. Each e-mail-based interview lasted about 30 minutes (confirmed with participants).

In addition to the interviews, the postings on the Discussion Forum on MyUnisa were treated as data to analyse. These were the 2014 into early 2015 postings one had access to because one also participated as a student. The postings were for the ODL5902 and ODL5904 modules offered at Unisa. About six students who completed the UMUC coursework at that time had registered for these modules and that was the number that participated in the Discussion Forum. As this study was an investigation of a dual university initiative, these data represented the information sought from Unisa's side apart from the fact that the data sources were Unisa employees.

3.6 Data analysis and interpretation

Data analysis was carried out guided by the framework presented in figure 3.1. Seven interviews were analysed during data collection period. Although data saturation was experienced, each interview presented a different version about how the participants experienced their learning. Of course, there were points of conversion, but how students rationalised about them was different. An integrated approach (shown in figure 3.1) was followed in analysing the interviews and participants' postings on MyUnisa Discussion Forum. This approach helped to enhance the explorations of variations of student experiences between UMUC and Unisa.

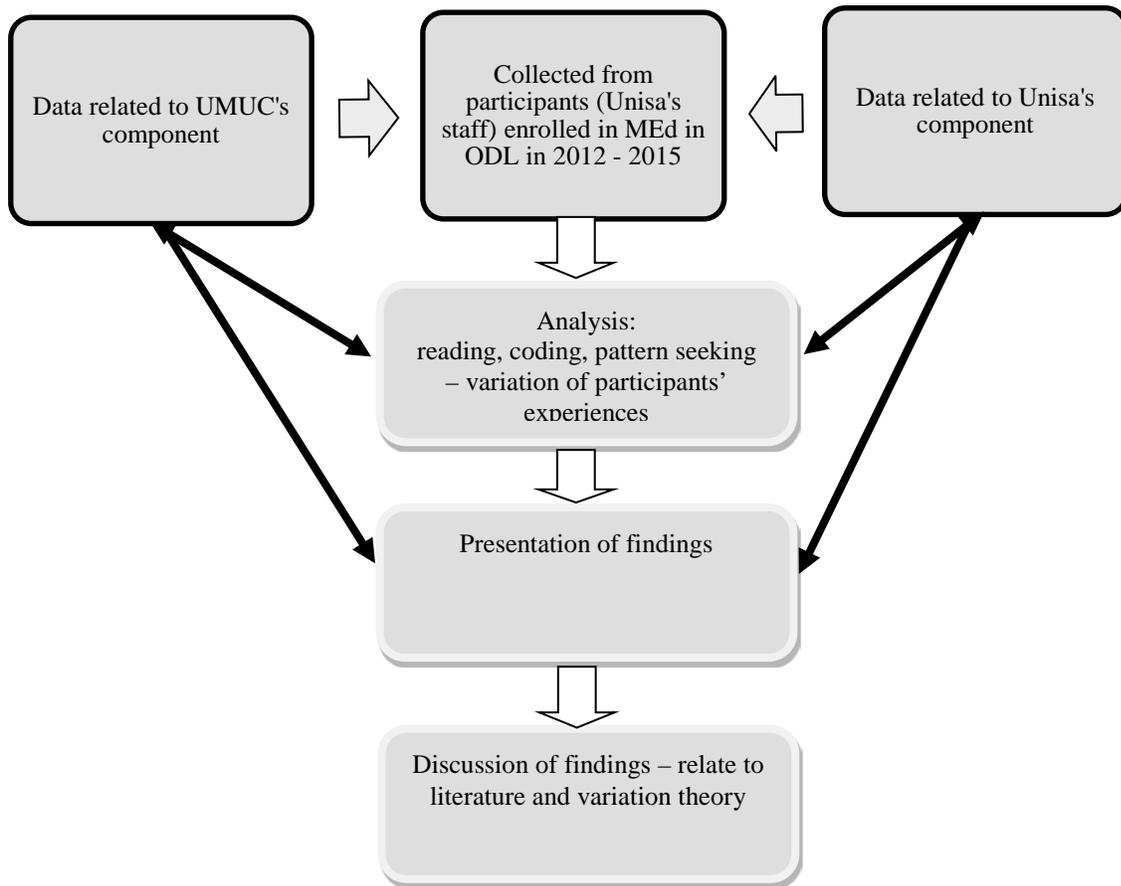


Figure 3.1: Data analysis framework for student experiences in a dual university context

Bryman and Burgess (2002) claim that analysis of qualitative data is generally problematic because the data tend to be bulky and unstructured, hence there is a need to organise and prioritise the data. Data from the interviews of the participants presented these challenges considering the element of variation catered for in the gathering of data, and the varied lengths of

the responses per the interviewee. However, Cresswell (2007:207-209) provides tips on how this challenge can be tackled and each interview was coded to protect the participants. Effort was made to properly manage data in the process of analysis through electronic filing of the interviews, and each interview was read closely, (i.e. sentence by sentence) several times in order to make sense of and familiarise one's thinking with the interviews. The participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity. The pseudonyms were Ptpt1 up to Ptpt7, meaning Participant 1 up to Participant 7.

Data analysis and interpretation followed a thematic approach (Rossman & Rallis, 2003) in line with the objectives of the study and variation theory. The main aspects mentioned in 3.2.1, which played an important role in the design of the interview guide, guided the themes (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). Verbatim statements were used to ensure participant representation (Hunter, 2009:44). Thus, it was suitable to tease out variations in the data (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014:411).

“Data collection and analysis are interwoven, influencing one another” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014:395). The arrows which point to both directions between data, analysis and presentation of findings in figure 3.1 attest to this fact. As stated above, data analysis started as soon as data had been collected from each participant in order to trace emerging patterns and to check for possible saturation. The analysis involved coding of data for words or phrases, categorising and tracing patterns and variations.

3.6 Conclusion

The “how” question of a study was crucial in order to understand how it was conducted. This chapter focused on the detailed description of the research plan. Phenomenography was described and the variation theory was referred as the foundation of this study. Furthermore, a description was made of the selection of the participants, the main themes of the interviews, and reflection on how the data were collected via e-mail interviews and the Discussion Forum on MyUnisa. Then, the research rigour for the phenomenography was described and indication given about how one addressed one's own preconceptions regarding the MEd in ODL as one was also a student on the programme. Reflection and description of data analysis were done.

Reflection on how to prevent one's own subjectivity was also made so as not to cloud the data. Reference was made to bracketing and one's own preconceptions were described. A document was used to check data analysis as a precaution to impose one's own ideas, views and experiences on the data. This chapter also described the ethical issues in this study and how the ethical soundness of the research was ensured. Lastly, an introduction to the findings was provided and reference was made to the process of data analysis. Thus, relevant methods chosen for the study were presented and substantiated. This entailed some reading on the methodology literature in order to make choices and decisions as well as motivate them in line with the research question and theoretical stance adopted. In the next chapter the research findings are presented.

Chapter Four

Findings of the study

4.1 Introduction

This study intended to investigate the online learning experiences, views, needs and understanding of the candidates enrolled for the MEd in ODL at Unisa and UMUC. The programme was offered online only and all the teaching and learning happened in a technology-enhanced environment. The purpose of the study was to explore the variation in the online learning experiences, views, needs and understanding of these MEd in ODL, to inform future teaching practices at an ODL institution. This chapter presents the results of the data analysis for the stated research question in Chapter One (Section 1.2) and it is in line with the data collection methods explained in Chapter Three. This presentation starts with the biographical information (table 4.1). As stated in Chapter Three, this biographical information helped to understand the variation of the participants' experiences even though the participants were all from the same institutional context, (i.e. Unisa). Then the main findings are reported under the three main aspects mentioned in Chapter Three.

4.2 Findings

This is the core section of the chapter. Under this section the findings of the data are presented. The importance of these findings lies in how the participants' experiences varied, which fulfil the ideals behind phenomenography. This variation can be noticed within the findings which are presented in an integrated manner. The variation surfaced from both the positive and unfavourable experiences of the participants in the study. Only in few instances students have shown common experiences. These experiences were more focused on the UMUC component of the MEd in ODL which was quite intensive and depended more on online learning.

4.2.1 Participants' biographical information

The participants' biographical information, which was deemed important in this study, in line with the variation theory and phenomenographic methodology, is presented in table 4.1.

Table 4.1: Biographical information of MEd in ODL students

Participant	Stage in the programme	Gender	Age range	Race	Studied online before?	Designation
Ptpt1	Dissertation	F	C	B	No	College of Education
Ptpt2	Just completed Coursework	F	D	B	No	DSPQA
Ptpt3	Dissertation	M	D	B	No	College of Education
Ptpt4	Dissertation	M	C	B	No	College of Science, Engineering and Technology
Ptpt5	Dissertation	F	C	B	Yes	College of Graduate Studies
Ptpt6	Coursework	F	B	B	Yes	College of Graduate Studies
Ptpt7	Coursework	F	D	B	Yes	Directorate: Curriculum and Learning Development

Age range: A: 20-29; B: 30-39; C: 40-49; D: 50-59+

Race: W (White); B (Black); I (Indian); C (Coloured)

The participants' biographical information categories reveal variations which can be understood as the reasons behind variation in their online learning experiences. The participants were at the different stages of their MEd in ODL, a situation that advantageously flavoured their varied experiences. Though five of the participants are females and that all participants are black, a variation was eminent in terms of other categories of their biographical information. Their experiences of studying online are fairly balanced between the no experience and more experienced. However, the programme presented some challenges to all the participants based on their experiences. The participants were from different sections at Unisa. In terms of the details that the participants provided in the interview, even though two were from the College of Education and two in the College of Graduate Studies, they were in different sub-sections/departments of these colleges.

4.2.2 A summary of the main findings

A summary of the main findings is presented in table 4.2. This was done to add to the rigour accounted for in Chapter Four (Section 3.3), that is, to show that data were coded in the process of investigation.

Table 4.2: Experiences, views, needs and understanding of the participants enrolled for the MED in ODL

Theme number	Theme (name)	Example of the participants' words
Experiences and understanding		
a)	<i>Learning about ODL</i>	<i>I was new at Unisa and I saw the programme as an opportunity to learn about ODL so that I can use acquired skills in my tuition.</i>
b)	<i>(Orientation) prepared me</i>	<i>...necessary, relevant and prepared me for the deep end.</i>
c)	<i>To learn online</i>	<i>...understand what students go through in order to learn online</i>
d)	<i>Equipped for e-learning</i>	<i>...equipped for e-learning and all forms of on-line learning</i>
e)	<i>Time needed</i>	<i>...time needed to complete the assignments</i>
f)	<i>Change of mind</i>	<i>I thought that Gamming for example was a waste of time but the assignment of gamming changed my mind into recognizing the beneficial and educational parts of gamming.</i>
g)	<i>Different learning experiences</i>	<i>I suppose those who were not new to: an education qualification, online learning, and had plenty of time would have a different learning experience.</i>
h)	<i>Too much pressure</i>	<i>There was too much pressure in terms of submission dates and there was no breather at all.</i>
i)	<i>Grading differed</i>	<i>Assessment of work was fairly done however the grading differed from the South African grading system and one needed to work hard in order to reach the American standards.</i>
Understanding the object of learning		
a)	<i>Theories associated with open and distance learning</i>	<i>The theories associated with open and distance learning were quite critical for my studies in ODL.</i>
b)	<i>Variety of methods</i>	<i>Yes the instructors used a variety of methods to explain concepts. Videos, audio streaming, conferences were used to assist students to understand concepts and even group work.</i>
c)	<i>Thirst for the current trends in education</i>	<i>My thirst for the current trends in education drove me to participate in the program.</i>
d)	<i>Learning was a two way traffic</i>	<i>Yes, because learning was a two way traffic, instructors were also learning from us because we brought a particular experience.</i>
e)	<i>Contribute to other students' discussions</i>	<i>Yes, I basically learnt as much as I was willing to study the suggested material and contribute to other students' discussions, at my own time and pace</i>
f)	<i>We did collaborative tasks</i>	<i>Yes, we each had to contribute to the discussion forum, we did collaborative tasks and we sometimes had to do peer assessment.</i>
g)	<i>I fully participated</i>	<i>Yes I fully participated in all group work done especially during the group project assignment each and every member of the group was assigned to do a task which was ultimately shared with the entire group and applied to complete the assignment.</i>
Learning objects		
a)	<i>A community of learning</i>	<i>...student to student interaction, student to teacher interaction, and we formed a community of learning.</i>
b)	<i>A meaningful support to our diverse students</i>	<i>Now I am able to give a meaningful support to our diverse students using these new technologies, I am able to think out of the box to reach out the large number of students in their multitudes.</i>

4.2.3 Experience and understanding

Under this theme participants gave their varied experiences in a number of aspects: reasons for doing MEd in ODL, orientation into the programme, shift made towards online learning and transformation, improved understanding of online learning, learning experiences during the programme, change of perception, unique experiences compared to other students enrolled for the programme, troublesome areas of the programme, assessment. Participants' experiences were on only few of these aspects.

a) Learning about ODL

In an ODL teaching environment it is crucial to know the reasons why people engage in programmes that help to improve their practice. The findings in this study reveal the participants' varied reasons as to why they enrolled in the MEd in ODL. The participants' reasons included basic understanding, self-development, acquisition of knowledge and skills, gaining more information on ODL. While Ptpt2 and Ptpt3 wanted to enhance their understanding, the areas in which they wanted this to happen differed, i.e. Ptpt2 wanted hers to happen in *education and technology for ODL*, whereas Ptpt3 wanted his to happen in *Unisa policy of Open Distance and E-learning, and to support Unisa students using new technologies*. Ptpt4 viewed the programme as an orientation tool as he had just been appointed at Unisa:

I was new at Unisa and I saw the programme as an opportunity to learn about ODL so that I can use acquired skills in my tuition.

Ptpt7 was in the Directorate: Curriculum and Learning Development (see table 4.1). So, she wanted to improve herself as a design and development specialist. Ptpt3 and Ptpt6 also wanted the programme to improve their skills in order for them to support their students effectively.

b) (Orientation) prepared me

Orientation into a programme of study leaves students with experiences that might differ from one student to another. The findings in this study reveal that participants had mixed experiences about their orientation into the programme, which is described differently through these phrases: *good and welcoming* (Ptpt7); *necessary, relevant and prepared me for the deep end* (Ptpt5);

really great and it gave me information (Ptpt1); *good* (Ptpt6); *well done* (Ptpt2). For Ptpt1 the orientation was *valuable for someone who never studied online before*. Ptpt6 appreciated the Department of Curriculum and Instructional Studies in the College of Education for doing the orientation. This department manages the MEd in ODL from the Unisa side. Ptpt5 appreciated the coordinator in this department, the UMUC tutors and fellow students she collaborated with. Ptpt3 raised a concern about the orientation as being *more theoretical than practical*. Ptpt4 viewed the orientation as challenging *especially in cases where I started late after others had begun*.

4.2.4 Collaboration

a) To learn online

The MEd in ODL presented new avenues to the participants to experience teaching and learning online. As a result, the participants had to adopt new approaches of learning in the midst of their academic work at Unisa and get to learn the online-based technologies used by UMUC in particular. Ptpt4 and Ptpt5 shared similar views which related to the demand of the course and time needed outside of their normal work, in order to participate in online learning activities. Ptpt1 *had to shift from doing things face to face and had to adjust, get skills on how to approach online learning more especially digital literacy skills*. According to Ptpt6, the course demanded 24 hour access to the internet connection and to move around with the technological devices *in order to be able to contribute to the online discussions*. In addition, this participant had to renegotiate her weekend engagements with her family. It however seemed easy for Ptpt3 because *I was technological and computer literate from the school where I was*.

The participants admitted that the programme brought transformation in their practice as academics at Unisa. Ptpt4 is now better equipped as a lecturer to engage in good practice and now, as informed by the course, *understand what students go through in order to learn online*. Online teaching and learning is now easier for Ptpt5. Ptpt1 has *a better understanding of online environment*. Ptpt2 felt that the course transformed her from having *no idea what it means to engage in timed technology-loaded educational activities* to being *sensitive to student explanation of why they did not complete work on time*. The programme has empowered Ptpt3 to teach online. This transformation was mainly contributed by the UMUC coursework component,

which mainly focused on the Web 2.0 technology. The Unisa component focused more on content and research.

b) Equipped for e-learning

All these participants had a positive experience about online learning. They felt that the programme enhanced their understanding of teaching online. Their substantiation of these positive experiences varied from one student to another, for example, Ptpt6 in particular had a better *understanding of the theories informing the design and facilitation of online learning*; Ptpt2 is now *equipped for e-learning and all forms of on-line learning*.

c) Time needed

The participants shared rich but varying views about their experiences regarding this aspect. The views mostly revolved around the demands of the programme. The fact that everything was happening online and that there were weekly submissions of tasks, with exception of the Unisa component, *this was a lot of pressure that needed discipline and determination from my side* (Ptpt1). To Ptpt4 and Ptpt7, the course was very challenging in terms of *time needed to complete the assignments* (Ptpt7) and *difficult schedule, and very steep learning curve* (Ptpt4). Ptpt2 expressed the toughness of the UMUC coursework: *UMUC study modules were not as easy going as expected when I enrolled*. This participant found the course, as described in her words, *very intensive* for someone working, and that load shedding (i.e. power cuts implemented by Eskom) affected timeous submission of assignments as there would not be any internet connection. She further expressed the intensity of the course:

The foundation module had more than four actions per week all requiring research and hands on experience of technology that was not too familiar for a beginner. The DETC 630 was too demanding on time activities to a point where I did not expect to pass.

The Unisa component basically focused on two learning activities: less intensive weekly posting of contributions and responding to other students on the Discussion Forum, and completing two assignments as per the given dates for ODL5902 and ODL5904 respectively. It was not really required for participants to make multiple contributions on the Discussion Forum as it was with

UMUC. Though Ptpt3 and Ptpt5 liked the coursework for the interaction it offered among students as a whole and students and their instructors, Ptpt5 felt that groupwork was *a bit of a challenge as some students did not do their part and yet expected full marks.*

Ptpt6 felt that the course gave her an opportunity to meet and interact with mates from other parts of the world who enrolled in the programme. She had to however keep *track of the different processes involved in completing a task.* She related her impression with the instructors through her story:

Though the facilitators are flexible when one has a serious problem (I lost my father and my sister during the course so I did not have internet connectivity in my village) it takes more strength and conviction to catch up with everybody else.

d) Change of mind

The findings reveal the participants' varying views in certain areas of the programme. Studying online made it possible for Ptpt1 to realise that *it is possible to work as a group in an online classroom.* Ptpt4 now knows that there is a lot that one can learn online. Ptpt5's mind about gaming changed:

I thought that Gamming for example was a waste of time but the assignment of gamming changed my mind into recognizing the beneficial and educational parts of gamming.

When this participant used to think that gaming was a waste of time, she now experienced it as beneficial and educational. For Ptpt2 and Ptpt3 online learning was enriching pedagogically. Ptpt6's perception is contextualised in an ODeL at Unisa, as she stated:

Unisa needs to do careful planning for the ODeL mode. The strategy 2016-2030 needs not be mere talking but proper operationalization of 24 hour student support, functional and teaching and learning ICT services and dedicated academic staff.

Ptpt7 appreciated the application of the constructivist theory:

I also saw for the first time constructivism promoting social and communication skills by creating a classroom environment that emphasizes collaboration and exchange of ideas in reality and in practise and not in theory.

e) Different learning experiences

Variations in this instance were of the background nature, for example, *Some students in our group were not coming from education background* (Ptpt3). For Ptpt2 the variations lied in the fact that most the Unisa staff members she started with in the programme were not able to finish. While Ptpt4 and Ptpt5 thought that experiences were not dissimilar, Ptpt4 thought that the participants had different learning experiences as he stated:

I suppose those who were not new to: an education qualification, online learning, and had plenty of time would have a different learning experience.

A unique finding in this regard is that of Ptpt1 claimed that she *experienced some form of bullying in the group where I was placed to perform group work.*

f) Too much pressure

The students variedly experienced troublesome areas in the programme:

- *To navigate the different tools or platform of myUMUC* (Ptpt3).
- *The interpretation of what the instructors was sometimes very difficulty. Group work and discussion forums grading was sometimes very subjective* (Ptpt7).
- *The coursework is too intense for some modules in that they expect the student to submit three assignments in less than seven days* (Ptpt2).
- *Some of these activities were time consuming and tedious for someone working at Unisa* (Ptpt2).
- *The daily requirements to go online and post* (Ptpt5).
- *A lot read in a short time, difficult to balance between work and study, managing and following the threads of discussions uploaded by other students* (Ptpt4).
- *Too much pressure* (Ptpt1).

For instance, Ptpt1 stated in full:

There was too much pressure in terms of submission dates and there was no breather at all.

g) We did collaborative tasks

The participants felt that the online discussion forums and groupwork afforded them the opportunities to engage in collaborative learning. According to Ptpt6, participants contributed in discussion forums, did collaborative tasks and even had to do peer assessment sometimes. For Ptpt7, collaboration came through discussion forum when students interacted with each other and with their instructors. Ptpt2, however, felt that collaboration only happened through group assignments as she stated:

Learning was collaborative when it came to group assignment's and class discussions but everything else was individually oriented.

Ptpt6 added:

Yes, we each had to contribute to the discussion forum, we did collaborative tasks and we sometimes had to do peer assessment.

Ptpt3 felt that the group projects enabled the participants to form a community of learning. The Unisa component did not have a group assignment and thus did not continue enriching participants in this regard.

4.2.5 Assessment and grading

Four participants experienced assessment positively because it was explained in advance with assessment outcomes, criteria and rubrics given in advance. Two of these participants also had some reservations, though. Ptpt2 had doubts about the extent to which assessment was fair. For Ptpt7 groupwork and discussion forums were assessed subjectively.

For the other three participants, the standard of assessment was challenging due to a very high standard at which it was pitched. The grading system differed from Unisa's as explained in Ptpt5's own words:

It was tough when the pass mark was 75% as opposed to 50% – the shift was eye opening and so the UNISA module lecture gave me 75%, I protested that my work was way above and deserved a better mark- they had to reconsider the mark- they thought 75% was a distinction.

The difference in the grading system was confirmed by Ptpt1, who had mixed views:

Assessment of work was fairly done however the grading differed from the South African grading system and one needed to work hard in order to reach the American standards.

The findings also reveal that in a group some participants never gave their best, but were undeservedly rewarded marks. The two different systems (i.e. UMUC and Unisa) caused differences in expectations between the participants and their instructors. For example, Ptpt5 felt she deserved higher marks for ODL5902 assignment when she compared the standard of her assignment with her UMUC experience. She resultantly queried the mark, hence the instructor changed his mind and awarded her a higher mark.

With UMUC it seemed that all efforts about learning were rewarded because participants earned marks even for participating in online discussions. This was not the case with Unisa Discussion Forum.

4.2.6 Constructivism

In this section the participants responded to questions which explored these aspects: critical aspects in the course, variety of teaching methods, motivation to participate in the programme, co-creation of knowledge, owning learning experience, collaborative learning and active participation.

a) Active participation and criticality

The content, learning materials and student activities were the identified critical aspects in the course, since they imparted varied experiences to the students. With particular reference to the content, Ptpt1 and Ptpt3 were more interested in learning about theories on distance education. The respective highlights for Ptpt2, Ptpt4 and Ptpt7 were doing the learning activities online, participating in online discussions, and completing assignments and listening to videos about invited keynote speakers online. Ptpt5 was intrigued by *designing my own website was really good and beneficial and reading the foundations of DE*. But the criticality was strong in learning about theories in ODL which is substantiated by the following statements:

The theories associated with open and distance learning were quite critical for my studies in ODL (Ptpt1).

Yes, my understanding of the theories informing the design and facilitation of online learning have improved (Ptpt6).

Specifically to the theory of constructivism, Ptpt7 had this to say:

I also saw for the first time constructivism promoting social and communication skills by creating a classroom environment that emphasizes collaboration and exchange of ideas in reality and in practice and not in theory.

The nature of the programme and how it was designed required the participants to participate actively in the learning activities. The participants' views actually confirmed their participation via online discussion forums and completing tasks and assignments. Ptpt4 felt:

I participated in all discussion topics within the allocated time every week or according to schedule.

Ptpt7 felt she participated “very much so since I did most of the work on my own”. Equally so, Ptpt1's views were strong:

Yes I fully participated in all group work done especially during the group project assignment each and every member of the group was assigned to do a task which was ultimately shared with the entire group and applied to complete the assignment.

For Ptpt3 active participation even meant taking on some leadership role:

Yes because at some point I assumed some leadership position in a group so I had to lead and facilitate learning.

b) Variety of methods

All the participants had varied positive views that a variety of methods were used in the programme to explain difficult concepts. Ptpt11 in particular mentioned that *Videos, audio streaming, conferences were used to assist students to understand concepts and even group work*. Ptpt2 thought that class interactions were the most viable methods to explain the challenging terminologies:

... there were various teaching methods that made difficult concepts clear. Each module had challenging terminologies which one got used to as they read the prescribed texts. The class interactions through online discussions were an excellent way of learning from classmates and instructors.

However, Ptpt4 thought that *it was not clear if there was such a range of teaching methods for the MEd in ODL*. Undifferentiated methods and technology that confronted learning in ODL5902 and ODL5904, as indicated above, is something that the participants seemed not to appreciate because they denied the participants flexibility of learning in the modules. The MyUnisa Discussion Forum was the only platform which were available to the participants to study these modules. It was a rather uncomplicated platform the navigation tools of which included discussion, announcements, additional resources, and so forth. The participants interacted via the discussion tool.

The findings also reveal that at times it was not clear as to what the instructors really wanted from their students, had difficulty in offering the course, were not always present and thus less active particularly on the discussion platform. To some extent this could mean that some instructors did not really pre-think their methodologies and approaches, as well as the online technologies they would use and for what purpose. The way participants experienced learning in ODL5902 and ODL5904 supports this finding. The participants expected the level of engagement and sophistication of technology in these modules as they experienced with UMUC, and they expressed this expectation to their one instructor who offered these two modules. The instructor posted his views in response to the participants. He indicated his reservation with certain learning management systems such as Wikieducator and Moodle and advised that he and the participants could consider Google Docs, Blog and Wikis outside of the MyUnisa Discussion Forum.

c) Thirst for the current trends in education

The participants' views were very diverse with regard to this aspect. Ptpt5 was motivated to learn new concepts, pedagogies and technologies such as ooVoo. The programme was interesting to Ptpt7. Ptpt1 wanted to learn about the current trends in education, wanted to develop herself and sought an understanding about how ODL operates. Ptpt2, Ptpt3 and Ptpt6 saw their motivation to participate in the programme in how it would benefit them with specific reference to their work at Unisa. For example, Ptpt6 stated:

I will be among the few colleagues at Unisa who will be ready to contribute towards successful roll-out of ODeL. This programme is also equipping me with the technological skills to facilitate learning and conduct research online. I am also widening my network with the ODL practitioners around the world.

A thirst for the current trends in education motivated Ptpt1:

My thirst for the current trends in education drove me to participate in the program.

d) Learning was a two way traffic

According to Ptpt2 there was not much time to co-create knowledge due to the tight deadlines to submit assignments. This was a different view from how other participants viewed their contribution in this regard. Ptpt1 felt that she participated in the co-creation of knowledge from the theories learned in the course. For Ptpt3, *learning was a two way traffic, instructors were also learning from us because we brought a particular experience*. Ptpt1 felt that *there was a time we had to create knowledge from the theories of learning that governs ODL*. But Ptpt2 had a different view:

...there was no time to dwell on that as the most important thing was to meet deadlines for the submission of assignments.

e) Contribute to other students' discussions

The participants felt that they owned their learning experiences, even though only three motivated their views in this regard:

Yes, I basically learnt as much as I was willing to study the suggested material and contribute to other students' discussions, at my own time and pace (Ptpt4).

To some extent- it was guided in that resources were provided and I could share my experiences (Ptpt5).

Yes. This is because I did a lot of research in order to come up with solution in this course (Ptpt7).

With this Ptpt7 meant that she contributed knowledge to learning which she made an effort to research in addition to what the instructors had prescribed in the course.

4.2.7 Social media

This section of the interview focused on the social media that the participants used in their learning experiences, and how the social media transformed the participants' approach to work at Unisa.

The participants listed a variety of social media which they were exposed to in their learning experiences, which include Twitter, Blogger, Wikis, Facebook, Weebly, Blogs, Dropbox, YouTube, Google Docs, Google, MyUnisa Discussion Forum, Diigo, Web 2.0 technologies, mobile devices, LinkedIn, UMUC Student Discussion Forum. As it can be seen in the list, some participants did not have a good sense between social media and other types of technologies as they only listed a mixture of them, e.g. Google, Web 2.0 technologies and Discussion Forum would not be classified under social media.

The participants used some of the above listed social media as part of their learning. Ptpt3 used social media for *student to student interaction, student to teacher interaction, and we formed a community of learning*. Ptpt5 started a Blog on distance education. Ptpt1 used quite a number of social media, which include Wiki Spaces, Weebly, Blogs, Dropbox and YouTube. She managed to create a website via Weebly, created Blogs to interact with other students in her group, used YouTube to search for certain concepts during the research project, and used Dropbox to file information for her studies in order to can access it anywhere and anytime.

To Ptpt4 learning about social media was an eye opener since he did not know before that they could be used for educational purposes. Ptpt2 *found it hard to keep following the various networks that I created during the time because of time constraints*. Ptpt6 felt there was nothing new she could learn as she was already experienced in the use of social media.

The programme thus far has brought a variety of transformations to the participants, except Ptpt6, who felt there was no transformation. However, this participant generally felt good about the course and hoped that it would provide better learning experiences and platforms for her students. Ptpt3 would now be able to give *a meaningful support* to his students especially rurally based ones as he could integrate technology in his lectures. He stated:

Now I am able to give a meaningful support to our diverse students using these new technologies, I am able to think out of the box to reach out the large number of students in their multitudes.

Ptpt5 can now engage her postgraduate students in research proposal writing using Skype and Twitter and *give feedback using synchronous methodology*. Ptpt1 introduced her colleagues in her section to Drop box and Google Drive so they could share knowledge, conducted online surveys with students in her section, and used ooVoo to engage with staff members. Ptpt2 managed to send some Power Point presentations to networks on Google and received a very high response rate. Ptpt4 wanted to link the social media with MyUnisa, but it seems that she was not aware this was possible:

I wish I could use them but myUnisa does not allow them, so I would have to use them outside myUnisa which I guess is not allowed.

The programme has brought some degree of transformation which has begun to benefit the participants' own practice. It is promising that these participants will continue to explore and experiment with the Web 2.0, even Web 3.0 technology for purposes of enhancing their teaching.

4.3 Conclusion

This chapter presented the findings of the study on the experiences of the participants who enrolled for the MEd in ODL. The findings reveal rich experiences in varying ways. The participants' contextual experiences are crucial in a learning programme. They can either be positive or negative, suggesting whether the participants will stay in the programme or drop out. But of cardinal importance is to understand participants' varied experiences which could be informed by their experiences about learning online, gender, age, and so forth.

In chapter Five the results (findings) are discussed. Conclusions are described, limitations are highlighted and lastly recommendations are made regarding the MEd in ODL as a dual degree of Unisa and UMUC.

Chapter Five

Discussions, conclusions, limitations and recommendations

5.1 Introduction

Chapter Four presented the findings of the study. This is the last chapter for the study. It concludes the study by presenting the discussion of the findings, drawing a holistic conclusion of the study, reflecting on the limitations of the study and making relevant recommendations as informed by the findings.

5.2 Discussion of the findings

The findings communicate a variations of participants' experiences in the online MED in ODL.

5.2.1 Co-construction of knowledge

As staff at Unisa, the participants enrolled for the MED in ODL programme to equip themselves with understanding, knowledge and skills that apply in ODL. In particular Ptpt4 thought that he stood to benefit since he was new at Unisa and thus ODL environment. Though the participants had positive experiences about the orientation into the programme, there were some concerns, e.g. the orientation was more theoretical; as a result a late starter in the programme could lose out. The participants had to make a quick shift about how they approached their learning especially with UMUC. Some participants viewed the programme as intensive and that they had to learn fast on how to manoeuvre their way through online technology in the process of completing their learning tasks – completing their learning activities, participating in online discussions, completing assignments and listening to videos, and designing their own websites. This was a question of those participants who were new online technology users and those who were experienced. As a result participants experienced transformation in various ways and felt that they then had developed a new understanding about how their students at Unisa experienced learning in an ODL context and how they as lecturers would support them.

In the light of the findings, participants would not fit in well with Lethbridge College's (2013:7) characteristics of online learners, specifically regarding the availability of time, thus not enjoying flexibility in this regard; obvious knowledge and skills of manipulating Web 2.0 technology for

purposes of their learning. The participants had not all started the programme with the required basic knowledge and skills, since they had to balance their work responsibilities well with their studies. The fact that orientation was more theoretical to some students could be the reason behind this. The phenomenon of problems with student retention as a result of questionable orientation strategies into the programmes of study is also prevalent in South Africa (Oosthuizen et al., 2010; Strydom, Kuh & Mentz, 2010; Prinsloo & Subotzky, 2011; Coetzee & Oosthuizen, 2012). This could also explain why the participants drop out in the programme as it has surfaced from the findings of this study. This would suggest a different approach to orientation in keeping with Borzath et al (2004:87) and Kelly (2013:461), who suggest that student orientation should be taken seriously.

A finding that kept surfacing is that of the theories of DE, which the students felt they had learned. This finding is crucial for Unisa's staff as they need to be empowered to understand DE so that they can be able to apply its theory effectively in their practice. It was not easy for the participants to study while working. Studying while working presents huge demands irrespective of the mode of teaching and learning. This is how the participants in this programme experienced their learning activities and schedule – the programme was packed with readings and tight submission deadlines. Some participants dropped out as a result of coping difficulties, including those who lagged behind as a result of late starting, a finding that is consistent with Fetzner's (2013) about students dropping out for this same reason. A human factor also contributed in this regard (Minnaar, 2011; Zimmerman et al., 2014:3) as some participants did not really understand the instructors' instructions. Some participants had positive experiences about participating in groupwork online whereas others had challenges with it in terms of group members' roles, bullying and lack of commitment to do the work. The most suspected challenge had to do with assessment in which the pass percentage was pitched very high at 75% at UMUC compared to Unisa's 50%. The participants felt that in some activities assessment was subjective, and this is supported by the literature (GAO, 2011). Similarly to what GAO (2011) found, Ptpt5 queried the percentage which she got in ODL5902, as she felt that she deserved a higher percentage based on the quality of work that she produced; this situation caused the instructor to change his mind to award a higher percentage ultimately.

5.2.2 Collaboration

Class interactions were appreciated as method of learning. The participants were motivated by their new learnings in the programme in relation to their reasons for enrolling in it. They experienced co-creation of knowledge, owning the learning experience, collaborating in learning especially through groupwork (Peters, 2002). Thus, constructivism found its way into how the participants learned in the programme. Constructivism supports learning that is enriched by collaborative and learner engaged approaches; students who are engaged in collaborative learning conditions experience more constructive learning processes (Subban, 2006; Zhu, 2012; CHE, 2014). In fact, Ptp7 expressed how she experienced the construction of knowledge:

I also saw for the first time constructivism promoting social and communication skills by creating a classroom environment that emphasizes collaboration and exchange of ideas in reality and in practise and not in theory.

Student learning reflected the three elements of constructivism, which are cognitive presence (i.e. students constructed knowledge), social presence (i.e. students interacted with one another especially in group work) and teaching presence (i.e. instructors directed learning, even though this this did not come out vividly in the findings) (Shackelford et al., 2012). The participants' online learning enabled them to connect and operationalise these three elements. The digital platform ensured the application of the theory of connectivism in support of constructivism (Siemens et al., 2009). The operationalisation of constructivism could have been even more rewarding if the participants had more time to actively engage with one another.

5.2.3 Social media

The participants explored a variety of social media such as Twitter, Blogger, Wikis and Facebook. This was a change of attitude in some students who could then realise the importance of the educational usage of social media such as forming a community of learners, whereas other students were already advanced in the use of the same. Being able to manipulate Web 2.0 technology has an advantage to transform one's teaching to the benefit of students (Knightly, 2007; Alexander & Levine, 2008; Goold et al, 2008; Zhang & Kelly, 2010). Group work and other activities such as accessing each other via online technological means made the

participants virtually draw closer to each other, and that motivated this community of learning (Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012). In addition, the programme earned the participants some degree of transformation with regard to using and navigating through certain online technologies such as Skype and Twitter.

The participants' experiences reflect good variation as can be realised from the findings of the study. The phenomenon of variation (Marton & Booth, 1997; Marton, 2000; Suhonen et al., 2008) in the study is the experiences of online learning in the MEd in ODL. According to Tong (2012:3), variation theory suggests that, in order to discern a certain aspect, we have to experience variation in that aspect. That is the object of learning (Marton et al., 2003:16). Patterns of the variation theory presented in Chapter Two are evident in the findings of this study. These are contrast, generalisation, separation and fusion (Marton et al (2003:16). Contrast surfaced from the participants' experiences of different aspects of the programme presented in the findings, e.g. their orientation into the programme, technology used and assessment. Generalisation surfaced from the participants' shared experiences of the online learning as executed via their manipulation competencies of the technology. The findings helped me to understand and write about the students' multiple perspectives in their understanding as revealed from their online learning experiences. The findings revealed critical aspects that students experienced simultaneously in the online learning programme; that is fusion.

5.2.4 Assessment and grading

The participants had mixed feelings about how assessment was done. They were much positive about the fact that assessment was explained in advance and that assessment criteria were given. However, an issue was raised about the subjective assessment for groupwork and participation in discussion forums; there was a thinking in some participants that they deserved higher marks than they were given. This finding perfectly supports the idea that assessment brings issues of dissatisfaction in students. GAO's (2011:11) finding about a student who queried his grade and whose assignment was re-graded ultimately, supports this claim. The big gap in minimum pass percentage between Unisa (50%) and UMUC (75%) stressed the participants.

5.3 Conclusions

This study set out to inquire into the MEd in ODL participants' online learning experiences, views, needs and understanding. As stated in Chapter One, this was a dual university programme initiative between Unisa and UMUC. The study was motivated by the almost non-existence of research in a dual university initiative context. The research question posed from the research problem statement, was:

What are Unisa staff online learning experiences, views, needs and understandings of the MEd in ODL?

In Chapter Two this research question was sufficiently addressed through the summaries of the scholarly literature which was consulted on student online learning experiences. Gurus in the fields of DE, ODL and online learning were considered to strengthen the literature in this regard.

To answer the research question empirically, a detailed plan about the primary data gathering was presented in Chapter Three. The phenomenographic methodology was identified and substantiated as the method of research and married to the variation theory. Participants in the study were purposively selected; using purposive selection technique as a suitable technique for phenomenographic studies. The research instrument was thoroughly explained as well as how data were gathered plus some challenges faced which demanded the review of some of the methodological aspects. Ethical issues were fully accounted for and analytical framework presented. Bearing in mind this detailed methodology and the validation statements of the study, which included pre-testing, that qualifies the fact that the inquiry was scientifically sound.

In Chapter Four the findings of the study were presented in accordance with the main aspects identified in Chapter Three. It was deemed very crucial to first present the main findings of the study with themes formed from the verbatim statements of the participants, in table 4.2. Then these findings were discussed in much details. Variations of these experiences were highlighted. The findings were discussed subsequently and substantiated with the presented literature in this chapter as well as the variation theory. The findings addressed the research problem as they

sufficiently revealed the participants' online learning experiences, views, needs and understanding in the MEd in ODL programme. As such, the purpose of the study was achieved:

The purpose of this study was to explore the variation of online learning experiences, views, needs and understandings through a phenomenographic study of academics on the MEd in ODL at Unisa during 2012-2015.

5.4 Limitations of the study

This study exhibited some important limitations, building onto their brief appearance in Chapter One Section 1.5, for which one wants to advise future researchers about, especially those who intend conducting similar studies. The limitations in question are related to the challenges that were encountered especially in the methodology. I did not get the desired racial mixture of the participants to fully add to the variation that this study was planned to achieve. This limitation was firstly due to the voluntarism that Unisa staff enjoyed from an ethical perspective to participate in the study. Secondly, the cohort enrolled for the MEd in ODL in 2012 – 2015 predominantly consisted of the black and white racial groups, only with very few Coloureds and Indians. Since purposive selection was the technique involved in this study, the first reason given above about voluntarism took precedence even though an effort was made to select from these groups. It is reckoned that variation would have been enhanced if the participants were a good mix in the study. The participants' preference for the e-mail-based instead of face-to-face interviews limited further probing even though they enjoyed flexibility of given as much information as possible due to the degree of flexibility given by the semi structured interviews – they made an effort to respond to the few questions given in a more detailed form and to give even more information. It is however felt that the information gathered would have been deeper and richer if there had been time to probe face-to-face. The timing of data gathering might have not been a favourable one because it was just before and overlapped into the examination period of 2015 at Unisa. Normally, lecturers are busier during this period because of the marking of examinations. So, participants might have thought that the e-mail-based interviews were much quicker rather than the face-to-face one.

5.5 Recommendations

The findings of the study suggest some recommendations categorised as knowledge creation, practice (teaching and learning) and research (ODL).

5.5.1 Knowledge creation

Students in the programme should be given extended opportunities to contribute knowledge as part of their learning. This is very crucial given the fact that this is a postgraduate qualification. That will help them to begin to think about the research component of their study. The constructivist theory as backed up by the variation theory, should form the basis of teaching and learning in the programme. Since the programme enrolls students from different parts of the world, it becomes imperative that these students' learning should be flavoured with their different cultural, ethnical, gender, etc contexts. Unisa staff trained in the programme should ensure address Unisa's fifth key niche area of "Open and Distance Learning". This can be done through contributing knowledge about effective student support strategies which are based on the technology enhanced learning and are latest and innovative in step with Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 technology. The professors who have undergone this training should consider supervising master's and doctoral students in ODL related studies. That would ensure knowledge generation and creation.

5.5.2 Practice (teaching and learning)

The orientation into the programme should be relooked, to ensure that it is more practical rather than theoretical. Preferably, the orientation should include a part where Unisa staff enrolled in the MEd in ODL receives initial hands-on training in computer lab about how the programme is presented and the learning management systems used to present the programme. In line with the orientation, a needs analysis should be done to assess the online technological knowledge and skills of the students so that necessary intervention initiatives can be thought about in advance which will provide the on-time learning support. The less knowledgeable and skilled students should have a dedicated support system, to nurture them until they are confident to can be on their own like the more experienced students. The intensity of the programme should be tailored such that it places reasonable demands on working students in order for them to cope in the programme. Specifically, certain aspects can be reviewed, such as:

- Reduce weekly readings – have five core readings depending on the length of the readings, and have the rest as recommended readings;
- Allow some flexibility with regard to the submission deadlines for assignments;
- Put in place efficient monitoring systems for the online learning through groupwork; and

Review and balance assessment policies particularly the pass percentage in the programme between Unisa and UMUC. Unisa should explore negotiations with UMUC for a possible tailor made MEd in ODL programme for the Unisa staff that will make this possible. Unisa staff should plough back to Unisa in terms of making sure its pedagogical practice is technology-enhanced as a result of the training received in the programme. Seminars should be conducted in which the staff that went through this training showcases the knowledge and skills gained. The participants in this study battled with time against the demands of the programme. A time management course should be considered in the programme.

5.5.3 Research (ODL)

There is need for evaluation studies about the effectiveness of this programme, more so that Unisa should invest money in it by paying for its staff who should plough back to Unisa on completion. This was only a limited MEd in ODL research study whose scope could not be expanded methodologically and otherwise. A similar more complex mixed method study could help add to the body of knowledge. Another study to investigate the feasibility of a MOOC-based programme could be considered which could be more convenient for students and offer much flexibility.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter concludes the study. The chapter has presented the discussion of the findings. It has also presented a reflection on the limitations of the study, drawn important conclusions on the study and confirmed the achievement of the research purpose. Lastly, the chapter made some recommendations about knowledge creation, practice and research.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Interview

Online learning experiences of students in the MEd in ODL – A phenomenography of the dual university initiative

Mishack T Gumbo, gumbomt@unisa.ac.za, University of South Africa

Opening

My name is Mishack T Gumbo

Thank you for consenting to participate in this research entitled *Online learning experiences of students in the MEd in ODL - A phenomenography of the dual university initiative*, and for being available for this interview. I would like to ask you some questions about your online learning experiences in your MEd in ODL programme. This research is important in the sense that it will inform the University of South Africa and the University of Maryland University Campus about the experiences, needs and conceptions of students registered for the programme so that they can take an informed action to address the needs of the students. This interview will last 30 minutes.

Let me start by asking you:

- At what stage of this programme are you currently? (ODL5902 & ODL5904/MPEDU91/Dissertation):
- Your gender:.....
- Age range: A: 20-29; B: 30-39; C: 40-49; D: 50-59+:.....(only indicate the letter of the age category)
- Race: W (White); B (Black); I (Indian); C (Coloured):..... (only indicate the letter of race)
- Did you study online before?.....(indicate yes or no)
- Section/Department/College:.....

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this interview. Your role in this study will be to reflect on the coursework of the master's degree in ODL which you enrolled for or completed at the University of Maryland University College and the University of South Africa. Your views will be highly appreciated. There are no right or wrong answers to the interview questions that I will ask. So, feel free to express your views. The purpose of the study is to explore a variation of experiences, needs, conceptions and understandings through a phenomenographic study of students on the MEd in ODL at Unisa during the period 2012 to 2015.

A. Experiences and understanding

- Tell me about your reasons for enrolling for the MEd in ODL.
- Tell me about the shift that you had to make in the course towards online learning.
- Do you now have a better understanding of online learning?
- This shift which you had to make towards online learning, do you think it was transformative in your life as an academic and how?
- Tell me about your learning experiences during the programme.
- Can you now, in retrospect, say that the experience changed your perceptions about online learning and in which way?
- Would you say that your experience of the MEd in ODL differs from the other students in the group?
- How, why and which aspects of your experience differ from those of other students?
- Identify what was troublesome (if any) during the coursework.
- How did you experience orientation into the programme?
- How did you experience the assessment and grading of your work?

B. Understanding the object of learning

- Can you identify critical aspects in the course that influenced or changed your understanding of the programme content?
- Would you agree that the course (MEd in ODL) used a range or (variety) of teaching methods to explain difficult concepts in the programme?

- What motivated/motivates you to participate in this programme? (Justify your answer).
- Did you ever feel that you were part of the co-creation of knowledge (add to knowledge creation)?
- Did you ever feel that you owned the learning experience (please, motivate)?
- Did you ever feel that learning was collaborative (please, motivate)?
- Did you ever feel that you were an active participant during the learning process (please, motivate)?

C. Learning objects

- Name the social media blends that were available to you on the programme platform.
- Did you use the available social media during the learning experience?
- Tell me more about your experience of using social media in a learning situation.
- Tell how learning about the social media has transformed your approach to work at Unisa.
- Is there any other information that you would like to share about your experiences?

Conclusion

I appreciate the time you took for this interview and for sharing your experiences about the programme with me. Is there any other information that you would like to share about your experiences?

Thank you once more for your participation!

Appendix 2: Ethics Certificate



Research Ethics Clearance Certificate

This is to certify that the application for ethical clearance submitted by

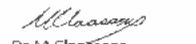
MT Gumbo [08572224]

for a MEd (ODL) study entitled

**Online learning experiences of students in the M Ed in ODL - A
phenomenography of the dual university initiative**

has met the ethical requirements as specified by the University of South Africa
College of Education Research Ethics Committee. This certificate is valid for two
years from the date of issue.


Prof V McKay
Acting Executive Dean: CEDU


Dr M Claassens
CEDU REC (Chairperson)
mcdtc@netactive.co.za

Reference number: 2015 MARCH /4444345/MC

18 MARCH 2015

Appendix C: Permission Letter

RESEARCH PERMISSION SUB-COMMITTEE OF SRIHDC

19 June 2015

Ref #: 2015_RPSC_044
Prof Mishack Gumbo
Student #: 08572224
Staff #: 90065050

Dear Prof Mishack Gumbo,

**Decision: Research Permission
Approval for the period 1 July
2015 to 30 November 2016**

Principal Investigator:

Prof Mishack Gumbo
College of Education
School of Educational Studies
Department of Science and Technology Education
UNISAgumbomt@unisa.ac.za
(012) 352-4143

Supervisor: Prof Ansie Minnaar
minnaa@unisa.ac.za
(012) 429-6887

**A study titled: "Online learning experiences of students in the M Ed in ODL – A
phenomenography of the dual university initiative."**

Your application regarding permission to conduct research involving UNISA staff in respect of the above study has been received and was considered by the Research Permission Subcommittee (RPSC) of the UNISA Senate Research and Innovation and Higher Degrees Committee (SRIHDC) on 12 June 2015.

It is my pleasure to inform you that permission has been granted for the study to:

1. Purposively select UNISA employees who were or are currently registered for M Ed in ODL [a collaborative initiative between UNISA and UMUC] between the years 2012 and

2015.

2. Invite the prospective participants to take part in the study voluntarily and to conduct interviews with those that are willing to participate in the study.
3. The RPSC precautions that although a working relationship may exist between the researcher and the prospective participants, it should not in any way play a role in influencing the prospective participants' decision to take part in the study. The use of a thorough and detailed informed consent letter will greatly minimize the risk of undue relational influence.
4. You are requested to submit a report of the study to the Research Permission Subcommittee (RPSC@unisa.ac.za) within 12 months of completion of the study.

The personal information made available to the researcher(s)/gatekeeper(s) will only be used for the advancement of this research project as indicated and for the purpose as described in this permission letter. The researcher(s)/gatekeeper(s) must take all appropriate precautionary measures to protect the personal information given to him/her/them in good faith and it must not be passed on to third parties.

Note:

The reference number 2015_RPSC_044 should be clearly indicated on all forms of communication with the intended research participants and the Research Permission Subcommittee.

We would like to wish you well in your research undertaking.

Kind regards,

PROF L LABUSCHAGNE
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: RESEARCH

Tel: +27 12 429 6368 / 2446
Email: llabus@unisa.ac.za

Appendix D: Consent Letter

Online learning experiences of students in the MED in ODL – A phenomenography of the dual university initiative

Mishack T Gumbo, Student number: 08572224, gumbomt@unisa.ac.za, University of South Africa, Supervisor: Prof Ansie Minnaar

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Dear Colleague

I am inviting you to participate in this research project on online learning of the MED in ODL programme at The University of South Africa (Unisa). Your role in this study will be to reflect on the coursework of the master's degree in ODL for which you enrolled or completed at the University of Maryland University College and the University of South Africa.

The participation is voluntary. You may discontinue participation at any time with no penalty. In no way will your participation affect your employment at the institution. This research does not foresee any risks or discomforts for you as a participant. You will receive feedback on the research in the form of a seminar and a copy of the publications after completion of the research project. You are free to contact me at any time during the research if you have any questions or if you need more information.

Important information regarding the research method is as follows:

Aim:

The proposed study will explore a variation of experiences, needs, conceptions and understandings through a phenomenographic study of students on the MED in ODL at Unisa during the period 2012 to 2015.

Background and significance:

I use the term *online learning* because the students participating in the study did the programme in question strictly online and not offline. The MED in ODL focuses on building academic and

professional staff capacity in open and distance learning (ODL). Our mandate is to respond to societal, public and private sector needs and open distance learning is a way to provide mass education which is needed in South Africa and in Africa. The master's in ODL educates leaders in education across professions to capacitate lecturers and others in ODL practices. Most lecturers in higher education institutions do not have an education qualification in addition to their professional degrees. This master's degree addresses the gap in teaching, ODL theories of learning and technology skills for teaching at ODL institutions. Lecturers and others are currently (2014-2015) enrolled at the University of Maryland University College (UMUC) for the two modules, ODL5902 and ODL5904 plus a Research Proposal Module (MPEDU91) or a dissertation of limited scope at the University of South Africa (Unisa). The UMUC programme is called Certificate in Distance Education and E-Learning. The name of this programme incorporates the term e-learning. However, as indicated above, this programme was strictly offered online.

I have read the information presented in the information letter on the study. I have had the opportunity to ask any questions related to this study, to receive satisfactory answers to my questions, and to add any additional details I wanted. I am aware that I have the option of allowing my interview to be audio recorded to ensure an accurate presentation of my responses. I am also aware that excerpts from the interview may be included in publications to come from this research, with the understanding that the quotations will be anonymous. I was informed that I may withdraw my consent at any time without penalty by advising the researcher. With full knowledge of all foregoing, I agree, of my own free will, to participate in this study.

Participant's name (Please print):

.....

Participant's signature:

Researcher's name: Mishack T Gumbo

Researcher's signature:

Date:

The researcher is: Prof Mishack T Gumbo

I _____
hereby give consent to participate in this research on experiences in the MEd in ODL at Unisa

Signature _____ Date _____

Appendix E

FROM: Samuel Mahlangu

P O Box 85

Madlayedwa

0460

**TO : Prof MT Gumbo
Department of Science and Technology
P O Box 392
Unisa
0003**

A Proof of editing of Master's of Education (Med in ODL)

This letter serves to confirm that I (Samuel **Mahlangu**), was given permission by the author (i.e. Prof M Gumbo) to edit an academic document (i.e. Med in ODL). As per our agreement, editing of the whole text included the acknowledgement letter, the body (content) and the bibliography. Editing of this mini-thesis (**Med in ODL**) was executed in accordance with the requirements of academic in-house style. Hence, UK English was used, Harvard style and grammatical changes were effected in this regard. Lastly, a summary report was compiled, to guide, comment and advises on the changes effected to the document.

Best regards

Samuel Mahlangu

Signature_____

Date_____

Cell no: 0791868729

E-mail address: sinkimahlangu@gmail.com