

Chapter 21

Distance Learners' Study– Related Interactions with Other People in their Life–Contexts: Investigating an Unexplored Phenomenon

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ABSTRACT

Distance learners are typically embedded within rich and complex life-contexts that comprise family, friends, work colleagues, and community connections. However, relatively few studies explore the interplay between distance learners' life-contexts and their studies and none examine the study-related interactions distance learners engage in with other people in their life-contexts. Changes currently occurring in the higher education sector, including the emergence of postgraduate lifelong learners, mean this position is becoming untenable. This research note provides an overview of a study currently under development that is intended to shed light on this unexplored phenomena.

DISTANCE LEARNERS' LIFE- CONTEXTS: AN UNEXAMINED SOURCE OF INTERACTION?

Contrary to a common stereotype that permeates the literature, most distance learners are neither “isolated” nor “lonely” but are instead embedded within rich and complex life-contexts that

comprise family, friends, work colleagues and community connections (Eastmond, 1995; Gibson, 1998; 2003; Gillis, Jackson, Braid, MacDonald, & MacQuarrie, 2000; Anderson, 2003a; 2003b). This is because even though a degree of convergence is occurring between distance learners and their campus-based counterparts (Wallace, 1996; Calvert, 2005; Kirkwood & Price, 2005),

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a substantial proportion of distance learners in advanced industrialised nations continue to be working adults aged between twenty-five and forty-five who have busy, established lives and are studying part-time to improve or upgrade their vocational skills and knowledge (Gibson, 1998; 2003; Kirkwood & Price, 2005; Moore & Kearsley, 2005; DETC, 2007; Peters, 2008). They may be physically and psychologically separated from their educational provider and the other learners in their program, but they typically live in urban communities and have strong social and intellectual connections with a range of other people in their lives and seek to maintain these whilst studying (Eastmond, 1995; Gillis et al., 2000; Scott, 2007). In common with many other adult learners, their primary identity derives from their life-context rather than the learning context, and whilst they value education, they are rarely able to make it their highest priority due to work and family commitments (Eastmond, 1995; 1998; Kember, 1995; 1999; Gibson, 2003; Kirkwood & Price, 2005; Lowe & Gayle, 2007). Their choice to study by distance education often reflects this, because it enables them to fit their studies around their life-contexts rather than vice versa (Wallace, 1996; Gillis et al., 2000; Furst-Bowe & Dittman, 2001; Bates, 2005; Kirkwood & Price, 2005; Moore & Kearsley, 2005).

Given the priority most distance learners accord to their life-contexts, it is somewhat surprising that relatively little research has been conducted that goes beyond dry statistics or pithy quotes and presents rich depictions of distance learners and their lives. Notable exceptions include Eastmond's (1995) multi-method qualitative study of adult distance learners enrolled in undergraduate programs at a United States college during the early years of public access to the Internet; and Dickie's (1999) phenomenological study of the lived experience of three distance learners enrolled in postgraduate programs at Canadian universities. A small number of studies highlight the influence of distance learners' life-contexts in

promoting or inhibiting their success (Kember, 1989; 1995; 1999; Eastmond, 1995; Vergidis & Panagiotakopoulos, 2002) and brief mention is occasionally made of particular interactions that occur between distance learners and other people in their life-contexts that actively contribute to their learning (Juler, 1990; Eastmond, 1995; Kember, 1995; 1999; Gibson, 1998; Dickie, 1999; Gillis et al., 2000; Stacey, Smith & Barty, 2004; Conrad, 2008). However, there are no studies that explore or document these types of interactions in any depth, and they are not recognised or represented in the dominant model of interaction modes in distance education developed by Anderson (2003b) based on the work of Moore (1989) and Anderson and Garrison (1998). Perhaps most tellingly of all, the literature does not even have a concise or consistently used term for the concept of distance learners' "life-contexts," which has the effect of limiting discourse on the topic by sidelining it and making fresh thinking about it less likely.

EXPLAINING THE DISINTEREST IN DISTANCE LEARNERS' LIFE-CONTEXTS

There appear to be several key reasons why this situation has arisen. Firstly, there is a tendency amongst educators to draw an artificial distinction between formal learning in a context determined by the educator and informal learning in a context related to the learner's life (Malcolm, Hodkinson, & Colley, 2003), despite evidence that the reality is more fluid and that each form of learning complements and supports the other (Svensson & Randle, 2006). Secondly, there is an associated tendency for distance educators to restrict their focus to three of the elements of a traditional learning context—learners, teachers and content—even though they acknowledge that distance learners are operating in a non-traditional context. A rare exception has been Chère Campbell Gibson who has consistently advocated that more

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