

**Re-examining interaction and transactional distance through the lived experiences
of postgraduate online distance learners.**

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Abstract

Current research into online distance education (ODE) has established the importance of interaction to counter the potential isolation experienced by online distance learners (ODLs). Consequently, programme designers and instructors seek to maximise opportunities for interaction in their delivery. However, much of this research is confined to institutionally bound conceptions of interaction; interactions occurring beyond the study environment, particularly for postgraduate distance learners, are significant but are less thoroughly investigated. Moore's (1993) theory of transactional distance (TTD), which claims that distance learning is characterised by the psychological and communicative separation of teacher and learner, is often used as a basis for 'testing' how effective different forms of interaction are in reducing transactional distance (TD). Despite its transcendental usefulness, TTD was developed at a time when distance learning was of the correspondence variety; thus, it tends to be instruction- and instructor-focused without appropriately reflecting contemporary ODE. Therefore, there is a need to re-examine the theory from the ODL perspective. Using narrative inquiry and photo-elicitation, this thesis investigates the lived experiences of part-time postgraduate online distance learners (ODLs) studying a professionally related master's degree. I draw on Dewey's (1946, 1960) theory of transactionalism to examine the multiple interactions ODLs engage in within and beyond the study environment, and how these impact on their experienced TD. The narrative data suggest that interactions are complex, multi-layered and occupy multiple spaces, and are therefore more accurately conceived of as non-dualistic educational transactions. These transactions suggest that TTD is no longer sufficient for understanding the ODL experience. I offer a more nuanced

interpretation of the theory, informed by participants' stories and recast from the learners' perspective. This reconceptualisation will be of interest to ODE programme designers, instructors, and administrators when seeking to ensure a meaningful ODE experience.

Table of Contents

Abstract	i
Acknowledgements	viii
Dedication.....	ix
List of Tables and Figures.....	x
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
1.1 Background context.....	1
1.2 Problem statement	4
1.2.1 Gaps in knowledge.....	4
1.2.2 Personal experiences.....	9
1.3 Aims and focus.....	11
1.4 Research overview.....	14
1.4.1 Research questions.....	14
1.4.2 Methodological approach	15
1.4.3 Terminology in this thesis	16
1.5 Originality and significance.....	18
1.6 Thesis structure	19
Chapter 2: Literature	21
2.1 General perspectives on distance education.....	21
2.1.1 The social justice perspective	21
2.1.2 The economic perspective.....	24
2.1.3 The quality perspective	26
2.2 Online distance learner characteristics	30
2.2.1 ODL competencies	32
2.2.2 Self-regulated learning.....	33

2.2.3 Self-efficacy beliefs	36
2.2.4 Moving beyond institutionally bound understandings of learners	37
2.3 Online distance education pedagogy.....	40
2.3.1 Personalisation.....	41
2.3.2 Flexibility	41
2.3.3 Support.....	42
2.3.4 Interaction.....	43
2.4 Beyond the academic context: The research gap.....	48
2.4.1 Interactions beyond the study environment	49
2.5 Conclusion: addressing the gap.....	53
Chapter 3: Theoretical framework	55
3.1 The premise of the current study	56
3.1.1 Dewey's transactionalism.....	57
3.1.2 Transactionalism and DE	58
3.1.3 Transactionalism and agency.....	59
3.2 Transactional Distance.....	63
3.2.1 Dialogue.....	64
3.2.2 Structure	65
3.2.3 Autonomy	66
3.2.4 TD as a relative construct	68
3.2.5 The development of TTD.....	69
3.2.6 Factors influencing perceived TD.....	73
3.2.7 Summary.....	76
3.3 Types of interaction.....	78
3.3.1 Moore's three types of interaction	79
3.3.2 Beyond Moore's three types	87

3.3.3 Summary.....	90
3.4 The role of theory in the thesis.....	91
Chapter 4: Methodology.....	95
4.1 Researcher positioning.....	95
4.2 Narrative inquiry.....	97
4.2.1 What is narrative?.....	99
4.2.2 Narrative analysis.....	102
4.2.3 Borrowings from other traditions.....	106
4.3 Photo-elicitation.....	108
4.4 Data generation.....	110
4.4.1 Sampling.....	111
4.4.2 Interviews.....	114
4.4.3 Challenges and opportunities of remote interviewing.....	117
4.5 Analysis.....	121
4.5.1 Coding.....	121
4.5.2 Creating profiles.....	123
4.5.3 Unit of analysis.....	124
4.5.4 The Listening Guide.....	126
4.6 Ethical considerations.....	128
4.7 Summary of chapter.....	130
Chapter 5: Findings – Introducing the participants.....	132
5.1 Abigail.....	132
5.2 Annie.....	132
5.3 Chetna.....	133
5.4 Colette.....	133
5.5 Fred.....	134

5.6 Lucy	134
5.7 Marion	135
5.8 Roseanne	135
5.9 Safi	136
5.10 Sasha.....	136
5.11 Shona.....	137
5.12 Tamac.....	137
Chapter 6: Findings – Presenting the themes	139
6.1 ‘There was no synergy there’: discordant and disempowering interactions	144
6.1.1 Co-learners as a source of conflict.....	144
6.1.2 The constraining nature of discussion forums	147
6.1.3 Collaborative task design compromises agency.....	150
6.1.4 The professional context as a source of conflict.....	152
6.1.5 Summary.....	154
6.2 ‘It’s no sacrifice’: Nourishing and empowering interactions.....	155
6.2.1 Interpersonal connections.....	155
6.2.2 Mind, body and environment connections	159
6.2.3 Summary.....	162
6.3 ‘It gives you the know-how of why’: Situated and self-regulatory interactions	162
6.3.1 Situated professional learning.....	163
6.3.2 Self-regulatory interactions	166
6.3.3 Summary.....	174
6.4 Chapter summary.....	175
Chapter 7: Discussion	177

7.1 ODE is characterised by complex educational transactions not one-dimensional interactions.....	178
7.2 Synergistic transactions.....	179
7.3 Agentic transactions.....	181
7.3.1 'I like to do it my way': Personal agency.....	181
7.3.2 'Even I didn't post': Self-belief as a precursor to personal agency	186
7.3.3 'The power of the group is really helpful': Collective agency	189
7.3.4 Summary.....	190
7.4 Re-examining transactional distance	191
7.4.1 Instructivist and constructivist dialogue.....	191
7.4.2 Required and permitted learner autonomy	195
7.4.3 Structure: clarity and constraint.....	199
7.4.4 Refuting the deficit model	202
7.4.5 Summary: Transactional distance from a learner perspective	206
Chapter 8: Conclusion.....	208
8.1 Summary of key findings	208
8.2 Contributions to knowledge	211
8.2.1 Contribution to ODE theory development.....	211
8.2.2 Implications for ODE practice	214
8.2.3 Considerations for higher education policy and strategy	216
8.3 Limitations and further research	217
References	220
Appendix A. Phase 1 interview protocol	240
Appendix B. Remit for producing images	242

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Dedication

In loving memory of Dylan.

List of Tables and Figures

Table 1.1: Key terms as used throughout this thesis.....	18
Table 2.1: Distance learner competencies (Hong & Jung, 2011, p.31).....	32
Table 2.2: Online Learner Competencies. Adapted from Grabowski et al., 2011	33
Table 3.1 Moore's Theory of Transactional Distance	64
Table 3.2 Overview of Measures of Transactional Distance	73
Table 3.3 Comparison of two studies of learner-learner interaction behaviours	86
Table 4.1 Overview of narrative methodology	103
Table 4.2 Research participants.....	113
Table 4.3 Overview of transactions selected for analysis.....	125
Table 6.1 Overview of participants' significant episodes	142
Figure 3.1 The interrelating elements of the theoretical framework	55
Figure 3.2 Relationship between structure and dialogue (Moore, 2013, p.71)	66
Figure 3.3 Relationship between dialogue, structure and autonomy (Moore, 2013, p. 74)	67
Figure 3.4 Overview of types of interaction	88

Figure 4.1 Positioning of my mode of analysis in relation to Leiblich et al,'s 1998 model.	106
Figure 4.2 Data generation process	116
Figure 4.3 Example of analysis using the Listening Guide	127
Figure 7.1 Relationship between constructivist dialogue, agency and TD	195
Figure 7.2 Revised model of TD	201

Chapter 1: Introduction

But the discussion tasks. I started out, following what the instructions we've been given which were, 'Don't worry, you can just write bullet points, you don't have to spend lots of time doing it'. And I started off doing that. Like when I was on the train and stuff, I could just write a quick, you know, my thoughts, maybe a couple of references or whatever. But no one else seemed to do that, everyone else seems like a really long drafted, you know, formal post. And then that felt like, 'Oh, well, I should do that too', so I changed what I was doing, and I'd start drafting it in Word and then you know, proofreading editing copying it over, which takes so long [...] And then the second module, where we had discussion tasks, because of that experience in the first module, having to write these really long discussion posts, and it all being graded, I just didn't want to contribute, seeing that no one else was contributing. Cuz writing, it takes so long. [laughs]

(Lucy, Interview 1)

1.1 Background context

Online Distance Education (ODE) is an increasingly common mode of learning within higher education (HE) (Qayyum & Zawacki-Richter, 2018). Recent figures show 378,000 students currently studying UK HE courses via ODE, of which 108,000 are postgraduate (Midgley, 2019). There are 586,000 postgraduate students at UK universities in total (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2019), thus 18% (almost one fifth) of postgraduate students are Online Distance Learners (ODLs).

Distance Education (DE) is not a new phenomenon; people have been studying while geographically separate from the learning institution as far back as the 19th century (Holmberg, 1995, p. 3; M. G. Moore & Kearsley, 2012, p. 23). However, the upsurge in recent years is undoubtedly due to the ubiquity of internet connected devices.

New technologies, which provide multiple opportunities for and channels of communication, both real-time and asynchronous, mean the distance learner (DL) can now interact directly with their instructors and co-learners. This has been a game-changer in the DE experience (Bates, 2005; Dabbagh, 2005). Where once, distance, or correspondence, education meant individual, independent study, the only contact being with a tutor in the form of posted written assignments and feedback (Holmberg, 1995), now DE potentially features virtual classrooms, rapid feedback on progress, and even collaborative groupwork tasks.

From an institutional perspective, ODE is a shrewd business move (Anderson & Zawacki-Richter, 2014, pp. 423-424; Keegan, 1993, p. 2), it is often seen as an efficient and cost-effective means of reaching more students (del Valle & Duffy, 2007; Panigrahi, Srivastava, & Sharma, 2018), expanding reputation, and remaining competitive and ahead of the global technological game. From the learner perspective, ODE is affordable, convenient, and responsive (Naidu, 2017a; Saba, 2016). It is often described as 'anytime, anywhere' learning (Selwyn, 2011); it enables one to access higher education without the expense or inconvenience of relocating or having to give up work. It is important to note at this point, however, that these discourses of convenience and accessibility do not consistently represent

the realities of ODLs (Butcher & Rose-Adams, 2015; K. Lee, 2017; Selwyn, 2011), and this disconnect contributes to the problem statement of this thesis.

In line with the growth of DE, there has been a concurrent growth in DE research. Much early DE research was concerned with programme design and development (Holmberg, 1987), with a focus on learning outcomes. It sought to prove or validate the quality of this mode of learning in relation to traditional face-to-face learning. It was thus characterised by comparative studies (Holmberg, 1987; Peters, 2014), which, despite finding that DE is on a par with (Saba, 2000), if not superior to traditional learning (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2009), are by no means conclusive or universally accepted (Latchem, 2014). DE research has been criticised for its tendency to lack a firm theoretical underpinning (Holmberg, 1987; Saba, 2000), and to be technology driven (Peters, 2014), often consisting of small-scale practice based 'show and tell' studies of innovative pedagogy (Evans & Haughey, 2014; Karataş, Yılmaz, Dikmen, Ermiş, & Gürbüz, 2017). This is arguably due to the rapid advances in technology outpacing theory development, along with the lack of uniform understanding and interpretation of what is actually meant by DE (Guri-Rosenblit, 2014; Traxler, 2018). Consequently, the literature often lacks clear distinctions between phenomena such as e-learning, online learning, blended learning, hybrid learning and online distance learning. In fact, some scholars assert that 'clear distinctions between online teaching, distance education, and campus-based teaching cannot and should not be made' (Hicks, 2014, p. 283).

It is now largely accepted by the scholarly community that DE is a discipline worthy of academic study (Holmberg, 1987; Peters, 2014). However, much of the research remains grounded in practice and seeks to evaluate pedagogy and resources from an instructional design perspective (Zawacki-Richter & Anderson, 2014). As already mentioned, much DE research is rooted in the comparative approach, which seeks to justify DE and prove its worth in relation to the presumed gold standard of education, that of face-to-face, contiguous learning. Although the discipline is beginning to move on from this perspective, a large proportion of DE pedagogic research centres on addressing the areas in which it traditionally has been perceived to be deficient, that is, interaction and communication (Zawacki-Richter & Anderson, 2014).

1.2 Problem statement

The motivation for this thesis is grounded in my personal experiences as an online distance educator in UK higher education, which have served to bring into stark relief the gaps in knowledge regarding understandings in the sector of the realities of ODLs.

1.2.1 Gaps in knowledge

In a literature review, Zawacki-Richter, Backer, and Vogt (2009) identified three levels of DE research: the macro (systems and theories), meso (management, organisation and technology) and micro (teaching and learning). A major finding of this study was that micro-level research far and above outweighs the other two; this was echoed in Martin, Sun, and Westine (2020). This is understandable as data in this area is more easily accessible, and it is a more immediate concern to academics

as it comprises instruction or learning design, interaction and communication in learning communities, and learner characteristics. A later study by Zawacki-Richter and Naidu (2016) examined a period of 35 years: 1980 – 2014. They identified ‘waves of alternating institutional and individual research perspectives’ with the institutional focusing on the meso levels and the individual focussing on the micro levels (Zawacki-Richter & Naidu, 2016, p. 262). The scarcity of macro level research indicates a lack of DE and particularly ODE theory development in recent years. The following section will highlight how there is a need to apply a theoretical underpinning to deepen our understandings of ODL realities and their interactions, which are currently reductionist, simplistic and institutionally bound.

1.2.1.1 Knowledge of ODLs is reductionist and institutionally bound

Although there is a large body of research aimed at identifying characteristics of ‘successful’ ODLs (see, for example, Arifin, 2016; Baxter, 2012; Buck, 2016; Choi, Lee, Jung, & Latchem, 2013; Hong & Jung, 2011), much of this is designed to address the problem of high attrition in ODE. It concentrates on personal and academic characteristics or competencies, such as motivation, self-regulation and communication, which predict retention. While such insights are important and useful in informing the design of ODE programmes, they tend to homogenise and present an incomplete picture of the diversity of ODLs, their individualities and unique socio-cultural contexts. What is needed are deeper insights into the wider socio-cultural and emotional contexts of ODLs and how these impact on the ODE journey.

We know relatively little about the nature of ODE students' interactions with instructors, peers, the learning environment and course content, or how students experience these interactions and how they interrelate with the wider interactions occurring in their non-student lives. Social constructivist approaches, which are grounded in assumptions about effective ODE and teaching (Abrami, Bernard, Bures, Borokhovski, & Tamim, 2011), are rarely checked or co-constructed with the students. This leads to a situation where 'the design of online learning environments is ultimately separate from learners' real-life environments' (K. Lee, 2018, p. 1255). Consequently, there are calls for more research into the 'psychological and social attributes of the learner' (Simonson, Schlosser, & Orellana, 2011, p. 139), the construction of learner identity (Baxter, 2012) and the experiences and perspectives of online students (K. Lee, 2017; O'Shea, Stone, & Delahunty, 2015) beyond their lives as students (K. Lee, 2018). Such socio-cultural and psychological insights would inform more relevant and meaningful ODL experiences.

1.2.1.2 Understandings of interaction are reductionist and institutionally bound

The narrative of Lucy (a participant in this study), which introduces the thesis, encapsulates several typical elements of the ODL experience: a full-time professional, enrolled on a part-time postgraduate programme, studying while on the move, engaging in asynchronous interaction. The topic of this narrative, discussion forum posts, will be recognisable by many who have completed a ODE course. The peer pressure resulting in a change of approach from a more genuine form of reflection to a polished piece of writing, detracts from the authenticity and sets the tone for subsequent similar tasks. I have chosen Lucy's experience to

introduce the thesis as it represents a common challenge of ODE, that is the creation and sustaining of meaningful, authentic and engaging interactions.

As we have seen, interaction is now invariably designed into ODE as a panacea for the challenges it presents. Indeed, it would now be unusual to find an ODE programme that does not incorporate principles of community and opportunities for students to interact synchronously and asynchronously with their tutors and peers. However, not only can this approach overlook the important role of structure and autonomy, it also risks disregarding the finer points of interaction itself. M.G. Moore (1989) described three types of interaction: learner-content, learner-instructor and learner-learner, to unify and standardise understandings of interaction in DE. Despite his assertion that all three types have importance in the design of distance learning, learner-learner interaction is often prioritised (Karataş et al., 2017). Moreover, along with developments in ODE systems and environments, there are now additional types of interaction to consider, for example learner-interface (Moore & Kearsley, 2012) and learner-environment (Karaoglan Yilmaz, 2017) and scales have been developed with this in mind, for example, the transactional distance between the student and technology, or TDSTECH (Weidlich & Bastiaens, 2018).

While a significant number of studies attest to the effectiveness of interaction opportunities for generating a sense of community and increasing engagement and motivation (Perveen, 2016; Purarjomandlangrudi, Chen, & Nguyen, 2017; Torun, 2013; Yamagata-Lynch, 2014), other studies are less conclusive (Olson & McCracken, 2015) particularly with regard to student learning (Watts, 2016). Simply increasing

the amount of interaction does not lead to an increase in learner achievement or satisfaction, and forced interaction can even constitute a barrier to effective learning (Simonson, 2019). A more nuanced investigation or problematisation of interaction in DE, including interrogation of understandings and interpretations of interaction, and the type and quality of interaction, is needed.

1.2.1.3 ODE research lacks an up-to-date theoretical underpinning

DE is still defined from a deficit stance, it is characterised by separation and the subsequent reduced interaction, which is often stated as the cause of lack of perseverance and high drop-out among ODLs. Research then, seeks to address this 'problem' and ultimately consists in attempts to reduce the separation, or close the gap, by increasing interaction (see for example Croft, Dalton, & Grant, 2010; Jiang, 2017; Madland & Richards, 2016; Steiner, Schlosser, & Mendez, 2013; Yilmaz & Keser, 2017). This approach belies an assumption that ODLs are alone, and that being alone is a result of an absence of interaction with tutors and peers; so, by increasing interaction with tutors and peers, ODLs will no longer be alone, and therefore will be more likely to persist and complete their studies. It also hints at lingering assumptions regarding the superiority of face-to-face learning as inherently interactive and social and the need to mirror this in DE programme design. The fact that attrition remains significantly higher in DE contexts would suggest that this approach of tackling separation simply by increasing interaction is not working well. I argue that this is due to the lack of a contemporary theory base for ODE, which means the assumptions around interaction and social learning go unchallenged.

What is needed is a problematisation of interaction in ODE in order to identify a set of principles and begin to develop a contemporary theory of DE.

1.2.2 Personal experiences

The main business of universities, particularly research-intensive institutions, is full-time, on-campus students (Universities UK, 2018); in 2018/19 there were almost 816,000 full-time students at UK HEIs, compared to just over 241,000 part-time students (HESA, 2018-19). Conversely, the main business of ODE comprises part-time, often mature learners who are studying while working (Universities UK, 2018). So, although ODE is increasing, and the trend is set to continue (Bates, 2005; Qayyum & Zawacki-Richter, 2018), the discipline is a relatively minor part of university business, whose systems and procedures are designed primarily around the traditional school-leaver enrolled on a 3-year undergraduate programme. This has its roots in the industrial era factory model of education, which is not designed with student learning at its core, and results in an inflexibility, which fails to respond to today's ODLs' needs (Saba, 2016). Three examples from my own professional context, as programme leader for a postgraduate professional ODE programme at a traditional HEI, illustrate Saba's (2016) points clearly.

The first example concerns postgraduate on-campus induction. During induction week, a huge amount of effort and resources go into welcoming on-campus learners to establish a sense of community and a feeling of belonging. During one social event involving tea and a wide array of delicious cakes, I observed to the colleague that we should consider how we might welcome and create a sense of community and belonging among ODLs. The colleague responded that the ODLs were welcome to

attend these events; not an invitation the learners in Mexico, Spain, Syria and Namibia would be in a position to accept. This highlighted to me that one current understanding of ODL is simply another way of referring to part-time learners, who are in the same geographical location, but not able to attend campus due to work commitments. While this may be true for some of the learners on my programme, it is not true of more than half of them. This suggests ODE is a threshold concept (Meyer & Land, 2003) which the academy in general has not mastered. Having a vague, uninformed awareness of the existence of ODLs, without fully appreciating what this means, or understanding who these learners are, effectively excludes them from the academy.

The second example concerns the structure of my programme, which is modelled on the traditional pattern of campus based HE teaching. The programme documentation, from the original programme proposal, which undergoes several stages of peer review before it is approved, is designed with traditional campus-based programmes in mind. It requires information about the number of 'contact hours', which must be divided between lectures, seminars, group-teaching, tutorials, and self-study. This results in a situation whereby the ODE mirrors the campus-based weekly structure each including a 'lecture', which translates as assigned readings, a set of text-based notes, or pre-recorded talk, and a 'seminar', which translates as a synchronous text-chat or webinar; all of which is supplemented by discussion forums and further readings. So the programme, is distance only in terms of the learners not being physically present on campus; it is not distance in the sense of responding to the needs of the non-traditional learner (Saba, 2016).

The third example concerns the attendance monitoring systems and procedures. All 'taught' (as opposed to 'research') students enrolled at the institution, are subject to the university's attendance monitoring systems. I am required to complete a register for the weekly webinar, which I submit to the student support colleagues, who contact any students who were not in attendance. This is problematic from both my and the learner's perspective for three reasons. Firstly, it assumes that attendance equates only to the weekly live webinars, it does not recognise or monitor 'attendance' in terms of active engagement with the assigned readings, recorded talks or discussion forums. Secondly, it disregards the fundamental attraction and principle of DE, that of flexibility and convenience. Thirdly, this well-meaning support, adopts an inappropriately patronising tone, for independent professional adults.

These three examples illustrate how 'the current rigid management practices in higher education' are 'designed for the efficient placing of thousands of students in specific classrooms, not for enhancing their learning' (Saba, 2016, p. 24 & 26). It illustrates the disconnect between the 'anytime anywhere' rhetoric, and the reality of ODE. The situations, needs and skills of today's ODLs are disregarded in these settings. This is potentially addressed by 'curricula and programs that are based on the theoretical foundations of distance education' (Saba, 2016, p. 30). However, as I have argued, there is a lack of up to date DE theory, which is grounded in the realities of today's ODLs.

1.3 Aims and focus

Having argued that contemporary *online* DE lacks a firm theory base for research, that is not to say there is a complete absence of theory in DE research. Along with the acceptance of DE as an academic discipline, came several theoretical models and perspectives, for example Keegan's reintegration of teaching and learning acts, Holmberg's guided didactic conversation, Peters' post-industrial model, and Moore's theory of transactional distance (TTD) (Amundsen, 1993). TTD is often cited in ODE research, and the quest to reduce transactional distance (TD) remains a key challenge for designers and instructors of ODE (M. G. Moore, 2019, p. 34). TTD helps us to understand that the separation of DE is not only a physical but also a psychological and communications gap (M. G. Moore, 1993). Early DE was characterised by a high degree of structure and learner autonomy with few opportunities for dialogue and was thus considered a solitary, individualistic experience suited to more independent students. The range of communications technologies available to contemporary DE allows the creation of more interactive and collaborative learning experiences, however, this risks reducing learner autonomy and the flexibility of individually paced learning. Moore advised a carefully considered balance between structure, dialogue and autonomy when attempting to reduce the TD between learner and instructor and between learners not least because 'psychological and communications spaces between any one learner and that person's instructor are never exactly the same' (M. G. Moore, 1993, p. 22). This encapsulates the complexity of a ODL's situation and highlights the need for close investigation of how they experience their individual TDs. TTD remains a popular theory through which to investigate ODE, and recent studies have applied

quantitative and mixed methods to the measurement of TD in relation to instructional design, learner satisfaction, retention and achievement (Huang, Chandra, Depaolo, & Simmons, 2016; Weidlich & Bastiaens, 2018; Yilmaz & Keser, 2017). Despite it being a relativistic construct, there are few in-depth qualitative explorations of it which are grounded in the learners' lived experience.

Furthermore, the limitations of TTD are grounded in its positioning as an instructor-, or course designer-centred theory as well as in its pre-digital origins. The theory along with the three 'macro-factors', was derived from the construction of a typology of DE programmes (M. G. Moore, 1993, 2019), therefore it is a theory derived from programme design, not from learner realities. There have been few empirical attempts to address these limitations within the fully ODE context. Giossos et al.'s (2009) proposal to reconceptualise TTD through the interactions between the learner, instructor, content, and peers, is a conceptual study. Goel, Zhang, and Templeton (2012) did offer an empirically based reconfiguration of TTD, based on the learner perspective, however, this was a quantitative study, conducted in a blended face-to-face plus online context.

So far, I have shown how contemporary ODE would benefit from a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of ODLs and the range of interactions they experience during their learning journey as well as the impact on their ODE experience. This deeper understanding will be useful for conceptualising ODL interactions in order to contribute to the development of a up-to-date theory of ODE. The aim of this thesis, then is to examine interaction, as experienced by a

group of postgraduate ODLs, with a view to problematising and challenging some of the assumptions surrounding the nature and role of interaction in contemporary ODE. In so doing, I seek to reconceptualise TTD and to recast it from the perspective of the postgraduate ODL.

1.4 Research overview

This section will briefly outline the research design comprising the research questions, which then shape the chosen methodological approach. I also clarify my interpretation and use of some key terms employed throughout the thesis.

1.4.1 Research questions

The purpose of this study is twofold. Firstly, I illuminate and understand the complex realities of ODLs. I will explore the interactions they engage in to generate rich qualitative data, which will allow a close examination of how these interactions impact on how the learners' experience the separation of their ODE journey.

Secondly, grounded in the data, I re-evaluate the relevance of TTD as a contemporary theory of ODE from a learner perspective. I approach this through three theoretical lenses: transactionalism, types of interaction (ToI) and TTD.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ 1. How do postgraduate online distance learners experience the separation between themselves and the academy?

RQ 1.1 How do online distance learners describe their interactions within and beyond the study environment?

RQ 1.2 How do interactions within and beyond the study environment impact on the individual learner's experience of the separation between themselves and the academy?

RQ 2. To what extent is the Theory of Transactional Distance a relevant framework through which to conceptualise the online distance learner experience?

1.4.2 Methodological approach

This study is exploratory and interpretive in nature as it was guided by and co-constructed with the participants: twelve postgraduate ODLs. It combines narrative inquiry and photo-elicitation over the course of three semi-structured online interviews to generate rich qualitative data in the form of narratives of participants' lived experiences as ODLs. The iterative analysis was shared at each stage with participants who suggested amendments or clarifications, which enabled an accurate co-constructed retelling of each participants' story to emerge. In this way, this study is both empirical and conceptual in nature as it draws on primary data generated from participants, which I then interpret through the theoretical lenses of transactionalism, TTD and Tol in order to draw conclusions and answer the research questions. The locus of my research, being conducted with a small number of participants within a postgraduate ODE context, lies more towards particularism. However, the focus of my study, is broader as I use the data to reconceptualise the theoretical framework and therefore, the findings are of wider significance for challenging popular discourses and assumptions regarding separation and interaction in ODE.

1.4.3 Terminology in this thesis

I use both distance education (DE) and distance learning (DL) throughout this thesis.

As a distance educator, with a focus on the learner perspective, my natural inclination is towards DL, however, I acknowledge there is a subtle difference between these terms. I use DE as a more comprehensive term encompassing learning and teaching, the instructor, the academy, the resources, and the learner.

DE is also used to refer to literature, theories and concepts which themselves use the term. DE in this thesis is general educational activity in which the learner does not attend the physical campus; it is distinct from other activities such as e-learning and online learning, which can occur as part of traditional campus-based education. In contrast, I use DL when specifically referring to the learner-centred activity.

I have used the term learners to refer to those studying a formal accredited programme of study. I use this in preference to students, as in the UK at least, student connotes the more traditional, full-time, campus-based adolescent, rather than the professional, part-time, adult distance learner, or non-traditional learner, who are the focus of this thesis.

There are no particularly technical or specialist terms in the thesis, which are not explained within the text, however it is important to clarify at this stage my own usage of some of the more common terms in order to avoid ambiguity. The following table (Table 1.1) lists the terms and concepts defined according to my own interpretation and use throughout the thesis.

Term	Definition/usage
academy	the formal educational institution, its representatives, resources and systems; including course instructors,

	student support services, the Virtual Learning Environment, students and the physical buildings and artefacts; usually refers to higher education throughout this thesis
beyond the study environment	the spaces, places, people and resources which the learner occupies and interacts with, and which exist independently of the formal educational programme the learner is engaged in. These may include the home, family, hobbies, and professional spaces. These spaces and places occasionally overlap/merge with the study environment
blended learning	a learning programme which combines distance education with periods of face-to-face, on-campus learning
distance education (DE)	formal accredited education, offered by educational institutions (usually higher education in this thesis), which may or may not occur via the internet, and in which the learners are separated in space and time from the academy and from each other
distance learning (DL)	used interchangeably with DE, but more aligned to the learner-centred perspective
instructor	the individual guiding the learning, they set tasks, monitor and assess engagement and progress, formally grade summative work. Known variously as and used interchangeably in this thesis with lecturer, tutor, teacher and educator
interaction	a relationship, between two entities, either animate or inanimate, which results in an impact of one on the other; this is a dualistic concept, which views the individual as separate from the environment
learner	in this thesis, the learners are adult students engaged in formal accredited higher education
lived experience	the individual psychological reaction to, interpretation, and retelling of events, encounters and interactions, which is necessarily different from the actual experience
online distance education (ODE)	formal, accredited education, offered by a higher educational institution, which occurs via the internet and in which the learners are separated in space and time from the academy and from each other
online distance learner/s (ODL/s)	In this thesis, ODLs are adult learners engaged in formal online distance education (ODE)
narratives	extracts or episodes from an individual's account or retelling of their experience
stories	holistic accounts or retellings of an individual's experience

study environment	the learning spaces, places, people and resources the online distance learner occupies and interacts with while actively engaged in formal learning tasks and activities. These spaces and places exist only as a result of the formal learning in which the learner is engaged. These include the institutional Virtual Learning Environment, the library, books, other learners. These spaces and places occasionally overlap/merge with those beyond the study environment
transaction	the act of experiencing; this is a non-dualistic concept, which views the individual and the environment as different aspects of an event

Table 1.1: Key terms as used throughout this thesis

1.5 Originality and significance

There are several important areas where this study makes an original contribution to our current understandings of postgraduate ODE:

1. The focus and content of the research data provide additional insights into the experience of postgraduate ODLs in terms of the interactions they engage in both within and beyond the study environment and how these impact on their experience of the separation between themselves and the academy
2. The findings will be useful to ODE programme designers, practitioners and leaders when producing courses, and during the teaching and learning and supporting learners by informing approaches to social learning, creating opportunities for authentic and applied learning and promoting control and agency
3. The study makes an important contribution to our understanding of the TTD by offering a reconceptualisation of this from the perspective of the modern ODL

The reader should bear in mind that my own constructionist philosophical stance, which accepts that multiple realities exist and that knowledge and understanding depend on perceptions (Silverman, 2013), has informed my approach to research design. Therefore, the research questions asked, the theoretical framework selected, the way participants were recruited, the questions posed during interviews, the narratives chosen for deeper analysis and the interpretation of the data and conclusions drawn, are all informed by my constructionist ontology. The data comprise participants' interpretations and retellings of their experiences and as such, they are also variable and influenced by a range of personal, social and cultural factors and therefore represent 'the authenticity of the human experience' (Silverman, 2013, p. 6).

1.6 Thesis structure

Following this introductory chapter is the literature review, which centres on the theoretical and empirical literature comprising general perspectives of ODE, ODLs' characteristics and competencies, ODE pedagogy, and interaction in ODE within and beyond the academic environment. Following this, chapter 3 presents a more detailed explication of the theoretical framework comprising transactionalism, TTD and Tol.

Chapter 4, the methodology chapter, explains my interpretivist positionality and how this has informed my approach to data generation and analysis. It introduces narrative inquiry, its varied interpretations and applications, before clarifying my own understanding and its use in this study. I also consider the accompanying photo-elicitation method and evaluate its contribution to the data generation phase. As the

participants are dispersed geographically, I conducted interviews online, therefore I include some reflections on the challenges and opportunities this method presented.

Following a description of the analysis procedures I employed, the chapter concludes with a brief commentary on the ethical considerations pertinent to this study.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 are concerned with data. I introduce the participants in detail in chapter 5, then chapter 6 presents the themes arising from data analysis, and following this, the discussion in chapter 7 interprets the data through the theoretical lenses in order to offer responses to the research questions.

Finally, chapter 8 concludes the thesis by reiterating the key findings, and outlining its originality in terms of the content, practical implications and theoretical contributions to knowledge. This chapter also reflects on the most significant limitations and considerations for further research.

Chapter 2: Literature

In this chapter I outline some key aspects of the research context of my project. I begin with a brief overview of differing socio-cultural perspectives, theories and drivers of DE in order to situate my project and explain the current situation. I argue that much of DE research is grounded in a deficit perspective seeking to prove its worth, or in an economic perspective, seeking to address high drop-out rates by identifying successful ODL attributes. I problematise the notion of interaction, a popular area of research, which is often presented as the solution to the challenges of ODE. Finally, I highlight the need to move beyond the institutional perspective to foreground the lived experiences of ODLs in order to move away from ODE research as a collection of best practice examples, to a more unifying body of research which can contribute to the development of a contemporary theory of ODE grounded in the realities of today's ODLs.

2.1 General perspectives on distance education

In this section I outline some key philosophies and perspectives on DE in order to shed some light on current positionings and research in the field as well as to situate my own study. I examine the development of DE thinking and research from the social justice, economic and quality perspectives.

2.1.1 The social justice perspective

For Charles Wedemeyer, a DE pioneer, its purpose was that of emancipation and lifelong learning for non-traditional learners (Diehl, 2012). Accordingly, Wedemeyer espoused a humanist, learner-centred pedagogy, he emphasised independent and

self-directed learning as the ultimate goal of education, and a personalised, responsive approach as the means to achieve this (Wedemeyer, 1971a, p. 3 as cited in Diehl, 2012, para. 5). From its beginnings, DE has been characterised by three key elements: non-contiguity, two-way communication, and communication mediated by technology (Garrison & Shale, 1987, p. 11). In its earliest most basic form, the communication comprised that between the instructor, or more generally, the institution, and the learner in the form of course materials and task responses via the technology of print. Apart from the non-contiguity enabling a self-paced, flexible way to engage, it is difficult to see how this minimalistic and functional communication might lead to liberated, free-thinking individuals. However, with the advent of freely available digital interactive technologies, Wedemeyer's ideals are perhaps more attainable. We know that communication is a fundamental component of learning, in all modes (Anderson, 2003; Bates, 2005; Conrad, 2014; Karataş et al., 2017), although it may be more accurate to use the term interaction, as this conveys a back and forth process rather than a simple movement of information from point a to point b, or vice versa. By allowing more immediate interaction, or dialogue, between teacher and learner, new technologies afford a more egalitarian, progressive type of interaction, or the 'educational transaction' as Garrison (1989) terms it. This notion of transaction as a mutual and reciprocal process has its origins with Dewey and is discussed in greater detail in the theoretical framework chapter.

The concept of independence deserves special attention as it forms a key foundation of theory and research into DE. Further to Wedemeyer's social justice goals of DE,

Moore premised his early work on the same ideals, asserting that distance nurtures autonomy and that autonomy and distance are the twin foundations of independent learning (M. G. Moore, 1972). However, unlike Wedemeyer, Moore viewed DE as being more naturally suited to autonomous learners, and did not believe that it should concern itself with developing independent learning skills (M. G. Moore, 1972, p. 84), thus effectively excluding the more dependent learner. According to Moore, the role of the teacher of is that of resource, from which the autonomous learner may seek help without renouncing control; in this way, distance requires the learner to be autonomous and the teacher to adopt a facilitative role (M. G. Moore, 1973, p. 670). Moore later developed TTD based on these ideas, which is discussed at length in the following chapter. Dron (2019) however, emphasises the need for the independent learner to occasionally relinquish or 'delegate' control; he moves beyond the learner – teacher relationship, to acknowledge the wider community as a source of instruction.

Building from Wedemeyer's guiding principles of the how (communication) and the why (independence) of DE, Garrison (1989) reconceptualises communication as the educational transaction, and independence as control. He interprets the educational transaction as the teacher-learner relationship, which is a shared experience with an emphasis on inducing knowledge through negotiated meaning, rather than transmitting information through a content-based system. This humanist and constructivist pedagogy, echoing Wedemeyer's philosophy, is the way to independence, or control. The tripartite control model, comprising independence, support and proficiency, reflects the complexity of the educational transaction; it is a

dynamic balance arising out of the sustained collaboration between teacher and learner (Garrison, 1993). Garrison claims that the independence perspective risks an individualist, pre-packaged approach to DE, while the control perspective emphasises the collaborative relationship. However, Garrison (1989) acknowledges that this conception of the independent learner as an 'intellectual castaway' (Moore, 1973, p.669, as cited in Garrison, 1989, p.25) does not reflect Wedemeyer's ideas. Nonetheless, this is the understanding of independent and distant learning that has become the dominant paradigm (Garrison, 1993) and the individualistic and transmission model underpinnings have informed the design of DE and online learning hence Garrison's preference for the term control.

The significance of control in DE is also argued by Dron (2005) and is facilitated by recent technological developments, which have prompted a new wave of learning theories, such as networked learning (Cronin, Cochrane, & Gordon, 2016), and connectivism (Siemens, 2014). These allow contemporary ODLs to achieve independence through 'cooperative freedoms', which reduce the reliance on the teacher (Dron, 2019).

2.1.2 The economic perspective

The interpretation of independent learning as a pre-packaged transmission of content from the academy to the learner, who studies alone, is an attractive prospect for today's market-driven higher education sector. The language used to talk about DE reveals the underlying philosophy; we talk of 'designing and delivering' learning, belying a view of DE as a product. It is attractive due to the potential to mass produce this type of education (Garrison, 1993) and there are parallels to be

drawn between it and industrial mass production (Peters, 1993). Peters (1993, p. 39) even observes that ‘distance teaching . . . is the most industrialized form of teaching’. Although he goes on to qualify this perspective, and proposes a post-industrial shift in which DE will need to adapt to post-industrial students’ ‘self-realization’ (p.49) needs, this massification of education, remains a dominant narrative in contemporary society in the form of MOOCS (massive open online courses). The neo-liberal narrative is strong, DE is considered to be more sustainable and cost effective than traditional classroom based teaching (Keegan, 2000) it opens up new markets without requiring significant investment in infrastructure (Rasmussen, 2018). The following quote is representative of the industry narratives surrounding online learning: ‘The combination of low cost, high convenience, and accessibility are transforming eLearning into the predominant global educating force of the 21st century’ (Pappas, 2019, para 2). Academic institutions and commercial enterprises cannot ignore the financial gains from the ODE market (Garrison, 2000), from government initiatives and funding (Keegan, 2000) to the unbundling partnerships between private enterprise and the academic sector (Swinnerton et al., 2020).

This perspective, to some extent aligns with earlier social justice objectives by taking education to the learners; ODE has removed barriers relating to ‘situational time and location’ (Morris, 2010, p. 121). However, the rhetoric of accessibility (K. Lee, 2017), choice, flexibility and employability (Butcher & Rose-Adams, 2015) that are often associated with ODE are not always borne out in reality. Other barriers including lack of social interaction, technology problems, insufficient student support, ineffective

pedagogy, and inaccessibility have been ‘introduced and intensified by distance education’ (Morris, 2010, p. 118). Thus, the economic perspective risks overlooking the digital divide and resultant ongoing inequalities, it reflects a technological deterministic approach by presupposing reliable connectivity, ownership of devices, and digital and learning skill sets (K. Lee, 2017) and perpetuates inequalities by favouring elite higher education institutions (Swinerton et al., 2020).

2.1.3 The quality perspective

ODE is often perceived as a lesser, second best mode of learning. This section counters some common deficit discourses of DE including those around quality, anonymity and isolation.

2.1.3.1 Distance education is low quality

When surveying the literature on DE, it soon becomes apparent that the popular discourses surrounding this mode of learning often reflect a deficit perspective. This leads to a tendency to conduct comparative studies seeking to prove the effectiveness of DE (Bernard et al., 2016). While the gold standard or default mode is ‘on-campus’ or ‘face-to-face’, DE takes on the mantle of second best; a last resort only to be engaged in when classroom-based learning is not feasible. Despite its lack of empirical grounding (McPhee & Söderström, 2012), this view does persist to the extent that even in 2020 in several countries, courses taken online at a distance are not recognised as equivalent (NARIC, 2020).

I suggest that the lack of conviction regarding the quality of DE may be due to stigma, and perceptions regarding authenticity and interaction. DE is for ‘those who

cannot attend classes' (Keegan, 1996, p.7) and typical DLs in the early days of correspondence education, were those traditionally excluded from mainstream education, such as women, those without an academic background, those unable to afford the expense of moving away to the place of study, housewives, and pensioners (Evans, 1994). Despite some persisting popular discourses around learning via the internet, the massive growth in ODE internationally, across the sector and at every level from high school to doctorate, is testimony to the widespread acceptance of this mode of learning into the mainstream. Although there are concerns, supported by some empirical evidence, around academic integrity and the potential to cheat in ODE (Lanier, 2006; Ramorola, 2014), this is an ongoing concern for the sector as a whole and is not necessarily more prevalent in online contexts (Peled, Eshet, Barczyk, & Grinautski, 2019).

2.1.3.2 Distance learning is impersonal

The belief that the lack of interaction impacts negatively on the quality and effectiveness of learning, teaching and assessment conducted at a distance has become the subject of a significant body of research and debate. Distance teaching is 'characterized by the separation of teacher and learner and of the learner from the learning group, with the interpersonal face-to-face communication of conventional education being replaced by an apersonal mode of communication mediated by technology' (Keegan, 1996, p.8). This definition assumes that face-to-face is inherently personal and distance is inherently 'apersonal'; that 'the ideal learning environment is one where teachers and students are co-located in time and space, and that it is this co-location that offers the best opportunity for clear and open

communication amongst everyone engaged in the learning process' (Herman & Kirkup, 2017). There are claims that 'mediated communication and actual communication stand in relationship to one another like a pencilled sketch and an oil painting of the same subject.' (Peters, 1998, p.155, as cited in Simonson et al., 2011, p. 134). However, I argue that all communication, including face-to-face, is mediated in some form, whether by the socio-cultural context, power relations, the physical environment, or by print and digital media. Peters is also quoted as affirming that online cannot replace contiguous teaching and learning (Simonson et al., 2011); but replacing 'traditional' is not the aim or purpose of DE, if we accept the social justice aims outlined earlier. In such claims Peters, and others, make assumptions regarding the inherent quality and positive experience of 'traditional' education. These simplistic comparative perspectives, focus on what distance cannot do that traditional can, they stop short of recognising the affordances of mediated communication such as offering opportunities for internal communication, or, reflection, processing and considered responses, which contiguous communication does not (Hrastinski, 2008).

2.1.3.3 Distance learning is lonely

Separation is widely cited as a defining characteristic of DE, which Moore's definition encapsulates:

the family of instructional methods in which the teaching behaviours are executed apart from the learning behaviours ... so that communication between the teacher and the learner must be facilitated by print, electronics, mechanical, or other devices (M. G. Moore, 1973, p. 664).

This separation is a psychological as well as a physical distance (M. G. Moore, 1993). It is often experienced as isolation (Maliotaki, 2019; Rush, 2015), and is cited as a significant barrier to success for ODE students (Bolliger & Inan, 2012; Croft et al., 2010; Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011; Phirangee & Malec, 2017) and can lead to partial completion (Steiner et al., 2013) or even drop-out (Ali & Smith, 2015; Boyle, Kwon, Ross, & Simpson, 2010; Phirangee, 2016). While international learners and those studying in a second language have been found to experience isolation more intensively (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011; Z. Zhang & Kenny, 2010), individual characteristics, self-concept, and media richness can also influence the degree to which ODLs are able to cope with the loneliness of online learning (Kwon, Han, Bang, & Armstrong, 2010).

A recent example which attempts to address the isolation and enact a sense of community for ODLs is seen in Webster and Whitworth (2017), whose research into the effects of combining distance and campus-based students in a single cohort is premised on a desire to 'bring distance learners as far as possible into the on-campus learning community' (p.72). The assumption that this is desirable belies a bias towards campus-based learning as the preferred mode, that the on-campus community is inherently superior, and that DLs are necessarily outsiders wanting to gain entry to this group. Similarly, the task which this particular study focuses on, requires students to work in groups to create designs for a 'core museum', which the on-campus students visit in an arranged field trip, and an 'alternate museum', which the ODLs are required to arrange to visit independently. The language used here, 'core' and 'alternate', implies a quality differential between the on-campus and

distance resources. Furthermore, the fact that the on-campus students are treated to an arranged group field trip, while the ODLs are left to sort themselves out, conveys a significant neglect of inclusive learning. Far from uniting distance and campus-based learners, this approach may exaggerate the perceived separation between the two groups. Indeed, this approach is suggestive of 'campus envy' and is in stark contrast to Bayne et al.'s (2016) assertion that 'online can be the privileged mode. Distance is a positive principle, not a deficit'.

These deficit views and perspectives persist despite research studies suggesting otherwise, so it is now necessary for DE research to transcend the need to prove its worth against face to face learning (Abrami et al., 2011). There is a move towards this (Saba, 2014), and, as Abrami et al. (2011, p. 83) assert:

distance and online learning provide exciting opportunities for not only increasing the reach of education and reducing its cost, but, most important to us, for increasing the quality of teaching and learning.

2.2 Online distance learner characteristics

In this section I comment on the categorisation of three levels of DE research: macro, meso, and micro. I then go on to review two bodies of literature which dominate the field currently, ODE student characteristics, and ODE pedagogy.

The two reviews by Zawacki-Richter and colleagues, introduced in the previous chapter, are undoubtedly a useful overview of the types, topics and methods of research within the field of DE, in terms of highlighting gaps and areas needing further research. However, their classification of research areas proves challenging

to apply in practice. For example, how to differentiate between Zawacki-Richter et al.'s (2009) meso-level studies of 'media selection . . . for online learning environments, and their opportunities for teaching and learning' (p.24) and micro-level studies of 'opportunities provided by new developments in educational technology' (p.25)? Or, what is the difference between the macro 'distance education delivery systems' (p. 24) and the meso 'infrastructures and frameworks for the development, implementation, and sustainable delivery of distance education programmes' (p.24)? The following sections, then, while generally aligning to either the meso or micro classifications, often encompass both. For example, studies of student support (meso) generally have a focus on learner characteristics (micro); evaluations of synchronous and asynchronous technologies (meso) usually examine the pedagogic affordances of these (micro). For these reasons, I organise the subsequent sections broadly as studies of ODE students, and studies of ODE pedagogy, which encompass both the meso and micro level research. The following theoretical framework chapter reviews the theory-grounded macro level research. Due to the rapid development of distance and online pedagogy, thinking and accompanying research, I have largely restricted the literature reviewed here to the last ten years.

Studies of ODL characteristics are mostly quantitative (Martin et al., 2020), and are premised on the problems of retention and attrition (see, for example, Bawa, 2016; Baxter, 2012; Russo-Gleicher, 2014), suggesting a grounding in the economic and deficit perspectives. They seek to identify characteristics or competencies of successful or persistent learners in order to implement targeted support

mechanisms. Often these characteristics align to self-regulated learning skills and self-efficacy beliefs, which are required for a successful ODE experience; and this conception of success is institutionally bound.

2.2.1 ODL competencies

Studies of learner characteristics generally agree with the likes of Moore and Garrison, in that independence and autonomy are necessary attributes for a successful ODE experience. Hong and Jung (2011) operationalise these as a set of 15 ODL competencies, grouped into five clusters: study vision, cognitive and metacognitive skills, interaction abilities, learner identity and management skills (see table 2.1).

Table 2 15 distance learner competencies in 5 clusters

Clusters	Competencies
Study vision	1. Develop study goals in accordance with own life plan 2. Motivate oneself consistently to complete tasks 3. Determine to succeed in learning with all the supports available
Cognitive and meta-cognitive skills	4. Regulate own learning processes and methods appropriately 5. Make optimal use of learning strategies for effective study 6. Apply previous knowledge and experience to solving problems in progress
Interaction abilities	7. Develop collaborative relationships with instructors and peers to improve learning 8. Formulate formal and informal communication network with instructors and peers 9. Initiate collaborative knowledge building by leading various learning community activities
Identity as learner	10. Enjoy learning itself 11. Recognize one's role as a student 12. Believe in one's ability to successfully complete the study
Management skills	13. Manage available resources including time, information and media/technology effectively 14. Manage own behaviors/habits to concentrate on learning 15. Manage schedule to meet all course requirements and deadlines

Table 2.1: Distance learner competencies (Hong & Jung, 2011, p.31)

Similarly, Grabowski, Kurtz, Jung, Beaudoin, and Suzuki (2011) presented a typology of 14 competencies categorised into three domains: the personal domain, the learning domain and the interaction domain (see table 2.2). The two models ultimately present a set of similar skills, behaviours and attitudes encompassing the ability to manage one’s learning, being proactive, and having self-belief; these attributes broadly align to self-regulated learning.

Personal domain	Learning Domain	Interaction Domain
Manage time effectively	Be an active learner	Engage in effective online communication
Set realistic expectations for online study	Apply learning	Engage in productive online communication
Comply with academic, ethical and legal standards	Be a reflective learner	Engage in collaborative online communication to build knowledge
Maintain determination to achieve learning goals	Be a self-monitoring learner	
Use technology proficiently	Be a resourceful learner	
Manage challenges of online learning		

Table 2.2: Online Learner Competencies. Adapted from Grabowski et al., 2011

2.2.2 Self-regulated learning

‘Successful distance learners tend traditionally to be abstract learners who are intrinsically motivated and possess an internal locus of control.’ (Simonson et al., 2011, p. 139). This conclusion reflects a longstanding narrative that DE is more suited to autonomous learners, while dependent learners ‘who need the support of the teacher are at a disadvantage’ (M. G. Moore, 1972, p. 84). These characteristics of successful DLs, relate to the notion of self-regulated learning (SRL), which is considered particularly desirable for ODE (Bol & Garner, 2011; Liu & Kaye, 2016; Nikolaki & Koutsouba, 2012; Ozkan, 2013; Swafford, 2018; Zhao, Chen, & Panda, 2014). Although variously defined and characterised, SRL essentially comprises three

dimensions or processes: metacognitive, motivational, and behavioural (B. J. Zimmerman, 1990). Effective, or high-performing learners operationalise these processes using a range of strategies, including planning, goal-setting, self-monitoring (Bol & Garner, 2011) and time-management (Broadbent, 2017; Broadbent & Poon, 2015). These strategies have been identified and measured within ODE contexts in attempts to promote their use by ODLS and improve the ODE experience and outcomes.

There is a correlation between the use of SRL strategies and academic achievement in ODE (Barnard-Brak, Lan, & Paton, 2010; Broadbent & Poon, 2015; Geduld, 2016; Wang, Shannon, & Ross, 2013), with some studies suggesting that ODE serves to develop these strategies (Ambreen, Haqdad, & Saleem, 2016; Silva, Lay, Hein, Biavatti, & Zonatto, 2017; Wang et al., 2013), or that ODLS employ them more than other learners (Broadbent, 2017; Zhao et al., 2014). However, despite this correlation, Broadbent and Poon (2015) caution against concluding that the online environment itself promotes the effective use of SRL strategies; they found that although ODLS used these strategies more than blended and face-to-face learners, the effect size was smaller. The authors suggest this is due to ODLS starting from a disadvantage and also that the 'effects of SRL strategies are dampened in the online learning environment' (Broadbent, 2017, p. 29).

The literature does not concur on the most effective SRL strategies for improving achievement. Bol and Garner (2011) claim the dimensions of planning, goal-setting, self-monitoring, and calibration judgements (perceived performance versus actual

performance) are particularly important in the DE context. These are all associated with B. J. Zimmerman's (1990) metacognitive processes. Cognitive and meta-cognitive skills is the second most important cluster of ODE competencies (Hong & Jung, 2011). Individual agency, autonomy and independence (Shearer et al., 2020; Simons, Leverett, & Beaumont, 2019), accepting ownership and responsibility, critical thinking, and metacognition are often cited as necessary skills and behaviours for ODE (Holzweiss, Joyner, Fuller, Henderson, & Young, 2014; Shearer et al., 2020). The significance of managing time effectively is borne out in del Valle and Duffy (2007) who identified three approaches to online learning among professional ODLs: task oriented, mastery oriented, and minimalist. While all three types were successful in terms of passing the course and reporting satisfaction, their approach to engagement differed significantly and was influenced largely by the time learners had available.

Broadbent and Poon (2015) identified an alternative taxonomy of strategies in their systematic review which shared similarities with Zimmerman's three processes but did not classify the processes and strategies as Zimmerman did. From nine SRL strategies (metacognition, time-management, effort regulation, peer learning, elaboration, rehearsal, organisation, critical thinking, help seeking) their review indicated time-management, metacognition, effort-regulation, and critical thinking as the most positively correlated to academic success. In a later empirical study, Broadbent (2017), corroborated the importance of time-management, but also suggested elaboration was linked to outcomes, which was in contradiction to

Broadbent and Poon (2015), who found little empirical support for elaboration. Both latter studies agreed that rehearsal (rote-learning) was of minimal to no use.

Taken together, these SRL studies lead to the conclusion that there is agreement on its general importance, but divergence on the relative impacts of the more granular elements.

2.2.3 Self-efficacy beliefs

An alternative framing of ODL competencies is the notion of self-efficacy (SE) beliefs. SE denotes the individual's belief in their ability to perform an action and influences their decision to engage in an activity (Bandura, 1977, p. 193). It is perhaps more accurate to talk of 'perceived self-efficacy', and it is this, combined with skills and abilities, which impact on performance (Bandura, 1977, p. 194) and ultimately persistence (Jan, 2015; W. A. Zimmerman & Kulikowich, 2016). SE is also related to learner identity, one of the clusters of ODL competencies (Hong & Jung, 2011).

J. C.-Y. Sun and Rueda (2012) investigated links between engagement and self-efficacy, in particular, computer self-efficacy (CSE) but did not establish strong links between CSE and engagement, which is in contrast to earlier studies. Jan (2015) also found that CSE was less strongly linked to satisfaction than academic self-efficacy (ASE). A tentative explanation for this could be the general increase in computer familiarity and skills, making CSE less significant (Jan, 2015). However, Jan (2015) did find a positive correlation between both types of self-efficacy and prior ODE experience. Similarly, W. A. Zimmerman and Kulikowich (2016), using an online learning self-efficacy scale (OLSSES), found that those with prior experience of online learning had higher levels of confidence in terms of being able to learn in a non-

contiguous setting. This is echoed by J. C.-Y. Sun and Rueda (2012) who found higher levels of anxiety among first time ODLs, which suggests prior ODE experience may impact positively on confidence and perceived SE and thus, likelihood to complete. SE beliefs are also acknowledged as a determinant of motivation (W. A. Zimmerman & Kulikowich, 2016), It is widely recognised that ODLs require high levels of motivation. Intrinsic motivation is included in B. J. Zimmerman's cyclical model of SRL (Panadero, 2017) and also features in Hong and Jung's (2011) ODL competencies. Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation have been found to have significant influence on continuation and engagement (T. Andrews, du Toit, Harreveld, Backstrom, & Tynan, 2014; Arifin, 2016). Resilience and motivation have been linked to expectations, identities and support (Baxter, 2012) as well as competence autonomy (Simons et al., 2019).

Based on these examples, we can see the general desirability of SE, which is impacted by prior ODE experience and has positive effects on motivation.

2.2.4 Moving beyond institutionally bound understandings of learners

Subotzky and Prinsloo (2011) shift the focus from purely what the student needs to master, demonstrate or do, to the need for 'mutual engagement in the search for reciprocal knowledge and understanding' (p.189) between the institution and the student. They also advocate a 'broadly defined' interpretation of success, recognising that this is not solely defined by completion and graduation. The authors acknowledge that to know a student entails more than demographic data and baseline skills and competencies, it requires knowledge of 'individual and collective

needs, attitudes, behaviours, academic and non-academic profiles, backgrounds, readiness and risk factors, life circumstances, socio-economic conditions, and other relevant details' (p.186). While this approach transcends reductionist profiles, becoming 'thus informed' (p.186) risks what could lead to intimate and actionable understanding of ODLs' realities, becoming a fact-gathering exercise and false sense of knowing on the part of the institution. Nonetheless, the resultant 'socio-critical model for explaining, predicting, and enhancing student success' (p.184) highlights the importance of institutional as well as learner skills, behaviours and competencies and thus attempts to transcend the dualism of learner and academy to a non-dualist mutual transformation of 'student *and* institutional attributes' (p.190).

Overall, the relatively unambitious aim of retaining students, risks neglecting other aspects such as the subtleties of student realities, a more comprehensive understanding of which, could inform the development of appropriate, engaging and inspiring ODE experiences. The preoccupation with attrition, or 'pathologizing drop-out' (Woodley, 2004, p.49, as cited in Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011, p. 179) reflects the industrial, or economic perspective of DE, it is approached from the institutional agenda whose definition of success is that of completing the programme, meeting the stated outcomes, and attaining the qualification. This view of education as a success versus failure dichotomy fails to appreciate the complexity and multi-faceted nature of learning in its broadest sense. A broader definition of success, from the learner perspective, recognising that even those who do not complete or achieve may well derive some benefit from their experience (Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011) paves the way to a more open research agenda.

Despite the adoption of a broader perspective, conceptions of learners inevitably remain limited by their institutional grounding, as academic research invariably has the academy at its starting point. In an attempt to transcend this boundedness, Rasmussen (2018) sought to understand potential learner experiences and decision-making processes before they embark on an online programme. She sought 'to capture their experience, not as students but as members of society' and in so doing highlighted the importance of recognising the complex realities of learners, particularly adult ODLs.

While this thesis is not directly concerned with success or failure, it is concerned with exploring ODE beyond institutionally bound interpretations and operationalisations of what it means to have a positive ODE experience. I seek to uncover positive and negative, success and failure; in other words, to explore the educational transaction as understood by the learner, not as determined by the academy.

These literatures provide important insights for online programme designers and instructors in terms of offering appropriate targeted support, however, they are limited in their quantitative grounding and use of a range of scales, which measure a restricted range of variables (Jan, 2015). They concern themselves with retention and achievement from an institutional perspective of success. More in-depth qualitative explorations of ODLs' experiences would complement these findings by illuminating the nuances and complexities of what successful and meaningful learning looks like for individual ODLs.

Furthermore, the models, scales and typologies of learner competencies do not dovetail neatly together. Scholars adopt these as tools and frameworks of investigation at different levels of conceptualisation and use inconsistent terms to describe them. For example, Bol and Garner (2011) select four components of SRL - planning, goal-setting, self-monitoring and calibration judgements – all of which would be categorised as meta-cognitive processes according to B. J. Zimmerman (1990). However, Broadbent and Poon (2015) list meta-cognition as one of nine SRL strategies including time-management, effort regulation and critical thinking, they choose not to categorise these into B. J. Zimmerman's three abstract processes. Similarly, Johnson and Cooke (2016) list eight SRL dimensions; some of which align to B. J. Zimmerman's strategies such as self-efficacy and help-seeking, while others align to his higher level processes, such as meta-cognition and motivation. Swafford (2018) diverges further with six strategies, some of which are familiar, for example time-management, and help-seeking, but he excludes motivation, adds environment structuring, which is one of B. J. Zimmerman's behavioural processes, and a characteristic of self-efficacy. The resultant coverage is patchy and disorganised, and as such detracts from the potential utility of these typologies for ODE learners, designers and instructors.

2.3 Online distance education pedagogy

Having outlined some key areas of research concerning ODLs, this section will now move on to review the literature concerning ODE programme design and pedagogy. These studies are concerned with, personalisation, flexibility, support and interaction.

2.3.1 Personalisation

As outlined earlier, ODE is often viewed as an impersonal form of learning. ODLs value personalisation (Shearer et al., 2020), in particular, a professionally relevant learning experience is important for postgraduate ODLs (Holzweiss et al., 2014). The academy can respond to this by designing assignments which can be adapted to have relevance in learners' professional settings (Fuller, Risner, Lowder, Hart, & Bachenheimer, 2014) and incorporating flexibility into programmes so that learners can create a learning pathway which reflects their local context (T. Andrews et al., 2014). Therefore, it is important that online instructors receive training in the specific pedagogic approaches needed for effective ODE experiences such as the appropriate application strategies to enhance personalisation (Andrade, 2015).

However, it is suggested that the instructor's role has a deeper and more complex function than merely responding or reacting, for example participants in Holzweiss et al. (2014) were desirous of a relationship more akin to mentoring. Similarly, Ross, Gallagher, and Macleod (2013) highlighted the complexity of ODLs' relationship with the institution, which is characterised by many 'comings and goings' (p.53) requiring resilience on the part of students, which the academy can support through careful programme design. So ODLs require an empowering form of support which encourages autonomy but provides a safety blanket when required (Shearer et al., 2020).

2.3.2 Flexibility

A consistent finding in studies of ODE is that learners appreciate and require the flexibility and convenience of learning at a distance (Butcher & Rose-Adams, 2015;

Naidu, 2017a; Simons et al., 2019). However, as Naidu (2017b) cautions, flexibility means more than being able to study anywhere anytime, it extends to enrolment points, teaching and learning processes, materials, assessment, and time to completion. Flexibility can also risk becoming an empty, or disappointing reality. Apart from providing opportunity to study while working, and without relocating, the granular design of tasks, support available, and expectations of engagement reflect a structural rigidity in some ODE programmes which fails to respond to individuals' unpredictable life circumstances (Butcher & Rose-Adams, 2015). The result is often a compromise between professional, personal, and student life, causing tensions (Selwyn, 2011). However, this is not necessarily the fault of the institution or programme design, ODLs can and often do feel the need to impose rigid structures on their approach to study in attempts to feel in control (Selwyn, 2011). The need to keep a tight rein on studying is often due to time restrictions; Sheail (2018, p. 476) affirms 'breaking free from time is not a possibility' and counters the claims that ODE is an 'anytime' endeavour.

2.3.3 Support

The role of the academy in supporting ODLs has been identified as a factor contributing to retention (Arifin, 2016, 2018); this support may be in the form of tutor responsiveness (Baxter, 2012; Simons et al., 2019), clarity of scheduling to assist with time management (T. Andrews et al., 2014), skills development, technological assistance, and providing feedback.

It is suggested that ODLs experience higher levels of anxiety than face-to-face learners, particularly those studying online for the first time (Abdous, 2019; J. C.-Y. Sun & Rueda, 2012), this has been attributed to the unfamiliarity of the online learning environment (M. Brown, Hughes, Keppell, Hard, & Smith, 2015; Yunjin & Soon Min, 2016; Zembylas, 2008), and technology related apprehensions (Bolliger & Halupa, 2012). Consequently there is a need for support and guidance, in the form of pre-sessional online learning preparation, to counter this unease, build a sense of preparedness in ODLs (Abdous, 2019; Bolliger & Halupa, 2012; Hillman, Willis, & Gunawardena, 1994; Yunjin & Soon Min, 2016) and reduce TD (Fuller et al., 2014). However, studying an online degree requires more than just technological readiness, as well as adjusting to online, these learners must progress through multiple realms of unfamiliarity, including the university, distance, and the discipline (Woziniak & McEldowney, 2015). Furthermore, the journey to ODE competence is ongoing, not only something that needs addressing or 'fixing' at the outset (K. Lee, Choi, & Cho, 2019).

2.3.4 Interaction

The last decade has seen a substantial amount of empirical research, from qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods traditions, as well as conceptual pieces dealing with interaction in ODE. Generally, interaction is perceived as a means to build a sense of community and therefore reduce isolation (see for example, Boyle et al., 2010; Jackson, Jackson, & Chambers, 2013; Stephens, 2016). Studies which seek to examine interaction from a theoretical grounding often concern Moore's (1989) three types of interaction: learner-instructor, learner-learner and learner-content.

Moore's typology forms part of the theoretical framework of this study and so will be discussed further in that chapter.

2.3.4.1 Interaction to engender a sense of community

There is an abundance of research evaluating interventions designed to mitigate ODE isolation through increased interaction. Interaction opportunities can exceed expectations and counter 'feelings of exclusion', which may have more influence on persistence than academic factors as well as playing an important role in the development of the student identity (Baxter, 2012, p. 122; Jaber & Kennedy, 2017).

There is a correlation between valuing interaction in the form of collaborative learning and feeling a sense of community (Chatterjee & Correia, 2020). This community-based social learning is desired by learners (Shearer et al., 2020), can help build social presence (Fuller et al., 2014), increase independent and self-regulated learning (Andrade, 2015) and may counter the anxiety associated with online learning (Zembylas, 2008).

Boyle et al. (2010) observed that peer mentoring initiatives can impact positively on retention, while Steiner et al. (2013) report on the success of the 'dissertation café', a 'knowledge-based social network', which brings together staff and students with the aim of addressing the increased sense of isolation felt by online learners during the dissertation phase. In a similar way, a social constructivist approach to assignment feedback was found to be an effective way to address isolation felt by masters level learners in Maliotaki's (2019) study. So far, these initiatives are of the asynchronous variety, Falloon (2011) found the use of a synchronous online platform

helped to promote dialogue and therefore reduce the perception of isolation for ODLs, but had the trade-off of reducing learner autonomy.

Despite the abundance of research attesting to the benefits of communication in ODE, it risks overlooking the subtleties and types of interaction, and opting for a simplistic 'the more, the better' mindset which prioritises quantity over quality. Addressing isolation in ODE is more complex than a straightforward increase of interaction, which can exacerbate perceptions of disconnectedness. For example, Phirangee (2016) and Phirangee and Malec (2017) found that opportunities for inter-learner interaction provided a forum for certain negative peer communicative behaviours, which intensified feelings of isolation and separation. A further point to note regarding peer interaction is the impracticability of this for courses designed to maximise flexibility but which consequently lack a unified cohort (Croft et al., 2010). More creative solutions are required in such cases and Croft et al. (2010) include a range of recommendations, which are feasible for 'asynchronous non-cohort situations' (p.53).

Abrami et al. (2011) point out, the provision of interaction opportunities does not necessarily result in effective interaction taking place. They highlight a need for more 'guided, focussed and purposeful interaction' which makes effective use of appropriate technologies (p. 88). In order to do this, it is necessary to consider who is interacting with whom, or what, why they are interacting and how this might best be achieved.

2.3.4.2 Interaction as co-construction of knowledge

That cognition and understanding is aided by social interaction (Hou & Wu, 2011; L. Lee, Lajoie, Poitras, Nkangu, & Doleck, 2016; Öztok, 2016), is the underlying principle for many interaction interventions in online learning. In-depth meaningful interaction both with peers and tutors, which leads to knowledge construction is particularly valued by learners (Holzweiss et al., 2014; Shearer et al., 2020).

Application behaviours, which include active, participatory engagement in communicative activities indicate a deeper engagement with programme content (Dixon, 2015). Students on programmes with higher levels of interaction and a variety of modes of input are more satisfied with their learning experience due to a belief that higher level thinking skills are more attainable in a collaborative environment than in programmes which rely on 'teacher-centred, text-based methods' (Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem, & Stevens, 2012, p. 120). Collaborative online environments can provide a forum for the enactment of identity, which is an important element in collaborative knowledge construction (Öztok, 2016).

Adding to these qualitative understandings, more positivist studies seeks to specifically quantify the kinds of knowledge and understanding achieved as a result of online interaction. A popular approach in this field is to examine the nature and content of digitally mediated communication using discourse and content analysis. Some studies have found that much online communication comprises the lower levels of cognition (Akarasriworn & Ku, 2013; Roseli & Umar, 2015) prompting calls for the development of strategies to promote higher level thinking skills. Strategies such as questioning practices (L. Lee et al., 2016) and argumentation and debate (Shukor, Tasir, van der Meijden, & Harun, 2014) have been shown to play an

important role in promoting deeper thinking and higher levels of knowledge construction during online group tasks. However, by restricting their focus to tangible 'evidence' of knowledge construction in the form of discussion forum posts, such studies have a necessarily narrow focus, reducing knowledge and understanding to a visible textual product, categorised according to various scales and typologies, such as Gunawardena, Lowe and Anderson's (1997) interaction analysis model. One such study even claimed to have analysed argumentative knowledge construction in a 'controlled laboratory setting' (Noroozi, Weinberger, Biemans, Mulder, & Chizari, 2013, p. 73); while this is an admirable attempt to demonstrate rigour and reliability, it is not an authentic learning environment, and so its value is uncertain. This type of online interaction research has the effect of devaluing types of interaction which cannot clearly be classified as knowledge construction, yet which are important elements of the learning process such as the community building functions discussed previously. They overlook the processes occurring before, after and external to the actual discussion board activity and assign too much importance to that knowledge developed and displayed within a collaborative environment, with the effect of prioritising it over individually reflective forms of knowledge construction.

The studies in this section clearly show the complex and divergent nature of the ODE student and the need for greater understanding of the learners and their local contexts. Of particular significance, the literature on interaction in ODE concurs on its importance in ODE for creating a sense of community to reduce isolation and for collaborative knowledge construction. However, it tends to prioritise institutionally

bound interactions. An area which we know relatively little about is the nature of interactions which ODLs engage in beyond the learning environment and what happens at the intersection between the two.

The next section presents an overview of the scant literature which does begin to transcend the academic context.

2.4 Beyond the academic context: The research gap

As we have seen in the previous sections, studies of ODL characteristics tend to be reductionist, focusing on personality traits, skills and competencies that are associated with 'successful' ODLs, such as independent learning, autonomy, SRL, and interaction. These literatures often concern themselves with the beginning of the learner's journey, in order to establish a baseline from which to provide targeted support. This echoes the deficit perspective; it underscores the separation of the learner and the academy and associated loneliness and subsequent attrition. The literature dealing with interaction in ODE is largely confined to the institutional context, and the learning environment; it is often technology driven and has an agenda of identifying instructional or pedagogic strategies for maximising interaction. It rarely considers learners' individual realities beyond the learning environment (Rasmussen, 2018); as such, it has the effect of fragmenting individuals and concerns itself with learners rather than people. This results in a situation where the research is approached from the perspective of the institution with a view to improving the learner experience within the learning environment. It is not concerned with the social cultural and professional contexts of ODLs, who are

‘embedded within their local communities rather than within the academic community’ (Koole & Stack, 2016, p. 55).

Given the ‘need for ODE programmes to consider individual contexts’ (Harrison, Harrison, Robinson, & Rawlings, 2018, p. 480), to ‘make links between the formal curriculum and students’ local environment’ (p. 492), and to design assessments that apply theory to professional context (Fuller et al., 2014), we need deeper insights into these local and professional contexts. According to T. Andrews et al. (2014), the ODLs’ environment is multi-faceted, requiring learners to multi-task, manage time and interact while ‘learning across life spaces’. This points to a more positive perspective on the ODLs’ life beyond their life as a student. A supportive home and professional environment undoubtedly contributes to progress (Arifin, 2016; Simons et al., 2019), however, more than this, dialogue occurring with others in the life context can be academically enhancing (Watson, 2013).

2.4.1 Interactions beyond the study environment

In her study of postgraduate ODLs’ interactions in their ‘life contexts’, Watson (2013) goes beyond quantitative measures of learner competencies and personal attributes, to explore the influence of life context interactions on the learner experience.

Recognising the teacher-centric dominant models of DE interaction, she presents an alternative model which highlights the beneficial instructive impacts of the learners’ interactions with their colleagues, family and friends. She concludes that ODE programmes would do well to encourage ODLs to proactively seek out these beyond study context interactions.

2.4.1.1 The workplace

Within the context of postgraduate ODE, the professional environment is a significant sphere of influence for learners who seek ‘socialisation into the culture, values, and mores of a chosen profession’ (Gansemer-Topf, Ewing Ross & Johnson, 2006, p.21 as cited in Holzweiss et al., 2014, p. 312). Many of those who enrol on part-time postgraduate DE programmes, are working professionals, or ‘post-experience’ students seeking to advance or enhance their career prospects (Watson, 2013, p. 177). Unlike many full-time, campus-based student, this type of learner identifies more closely with their professional life than their academic life (Watson, 2013) and so their professional context is an important source of intellectual and instructional interactions (Ferguson, 2010). These interactions include those with colleagues, mentors, peers and customers, which can positively influence learners’ academic performance (Ferguson, 2010; Watson, 2013). In particular, Watson (2013) identifies five areas of benefit for learning facilitated by workplace interactions around the learner’s studies: obtaining information for assignments, obtaining assistance with understanding content, applying learning to real-world, sharing knowledge and obtaining feedback.

Similarly, K. Lee (2018) identifies a double-layered community of practice model as a way to achieve an ‘authentically constructivist online learning’ experience (p.1256). Lee’s double-layered model encourages learners to extend and enhance the community of practice established within a study programme by enacting a two-way process between the study environment and the professional environment. She draws similar conclusions to Watson (2013), and Ferguson (2010) in that the design

of the programme can exploit the professional sphere by explicitly instructing learners to establish supportive connections in the workplace. Lee goes further, however, by recommending this is underpinned by a theoretical understanding of the communities of practice model, where neither Watson nor Ferguson align strongly to a particular theory.

These studies show how the intersection between the educational and professional environment is a rich source of learning in both spheres. The scarcity of research into this intersection is therefore surprising and it is unfortunate that more is not made of this potentially untapped source of support, enhancement, application and stimulation.

2.4.1.2 The social and cultural spheres

While recognition of the existence of ODLs' social and cultural local contexts, is not absent from the literature, it rarely goes further than to acknowledge this as a possible source of practical support or a potential obstacle. The literature makes assumptions and overgeneralisations regarding the socio-cultural background of learners, which reflect the deficit narrative of obstacles faced by these learners resulting in remedial support mechanisms (K. Lee & Bligh, 2019), which, as I argued earlier, fail to fully embrace the myriad individual realities and associated needs of ODLs. In order to move away from the deficit narratives to a more emancipatory approach, K. Lee and Bligh (2019, p. 166) stress the need 'to hear more of the authentic voices of international students in their full particularity'.

Some researchers have attempted to give voice to ODLs, for example Buck (2016) presents 'an intimate, detail-rich look at the lives of distance learners' (p. 143) with a particular focus on their individual learning environments and study habits. Her study does begin to move beyond the deficit narrative of ODLs' social and familial milieu as obstacles and distractions to be managed; she uses photo-elicitation as a method of co-constructive research with participants to foreground the realities of their learning environment and behaviours. However, it is essentially a study of the problems, specifically those related to information skills, faced by ODLs, and how the institution might offer support to address these problems, it does not move beyond the academy-bound framing of their lives as learners. For example, Buck views participants' broad interpretations of the prompts for images as a limitation of the study rather than an opportunity to pursue valuable asides offering insights into learners' realities. This is not a criticism of Buck's valuable research and findings with regard to library support for ODLs, but despite its potential to uncover and illuminate some of the particularities of ODLs' lives beyond the student, it remains grounded in the institutional perspective, confining its insights to the academic sphere.

Nonetheless, there is some emancipatory benefit from co-constructive studies like Buck's as they give ODLs the impression that they are being recognised and valued (Buck, 2016), this indicates the importance of further more ambitious research of this nature.

To better understand the broader social contexts of ODLs, S. Y. Sun (2018) investigated the situated nature of ODLs' environments. Her study highlights how learners' physical and social space-making behaviours combine with those of the

academy to co-create an optimal learning environment. A unique element of this study is how learners reported 'weaving their own 'social context' or 'social fabric' into their learning spaces' (S. Y. Sun, 2018, p. 948). This weaving enhanced the participants' learning experience by providing an authentic arena in which to apply their learning. However, this practice is perhaps less unique when we consider it in light of the language learning context of Sun's study; learning a language necessarily entails seeking out 'real-life' opportunities to practice, and these real-life interactions therefore become one of several learning resources, rather than authentic beyond study encounters.

While studies such as these move towards a learner-centred perspective, grounded in the ODLs' situated realities, they remain confined to understandings of the learner as learner, thus neglecting to comprehend the individual holistically.

2.5 Conclusion: addressing the gap

This literature review has highlighted some important understandings of ODE in terms of value-laden philosophies, and institutionally bound narratives and research agendas, while emphasising the limitations and gaps in the field. I have countered some of the persistent deficit discourses of DE, which are grounded in unfounded assumptions regarding the nature and quality of DE. Focussing on research literature from the past decade, I have reviewed some of the more substantial areas of micro-level research which concern ODE pedagogy, ODE students and ODE interaction and communication. I have shown how these bodies of research make valuable contributions to our understanding of ODE students and pedagogy but are

constrained within academy-bound conceptions of success, interaction, and knowledge construction, and therefore present an incomplete picture. Through this chapter, I have emphasised how little we know about learners' wider socio-cultural contexts and the role this plays in their learning.

Some further beneficial avenues of exploration could usefully transcend quantitative measures of ODLs' characteristics and competencies to qualitatively explore the holistic, situated individual. Furthermore, given the importance afforded interaction and communication in ODE, the current literature would benefit from a more nuanced examination of interaction, which is grounded in the wider socio-cultural context of the ODL and which adopts a broader conceptualisation. My thesis seeks to address this gap by adopting a qualitative approach to exploring ODLs' lived experiences of their ODE journey through the interactions they engage in both within and beyond the academic environment.

Having situated my study within the ODE literature, the next chapter, examines more deeply the theoretical underpinning which guides my research, and which provides the conceptual lenses through which I seek to understand the nature of the postgraduate ODL experience.

Chapter 3: Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework underpinning this study is comprised of three elements. The grand theory underpinning, or rather encompassing the whole thesis is Dewey's theory of transactionalism. Transactionalism, as will be shown later in this chapter, provides an appropriate non-dualist lens through which to explore and analyse the complex interplay of interactions in which ODLs engage. Secondly, also in line with the focus on the interactions ODLs engage in and how they impact on their experience, I apply Moore's typology of interactions to frame data generation and analysis. Finally, the third component of the theoretical framework is Moore's TTD, which I seek to re-examine from the basis of ODLs' realities. Figure 3.1 represents the relationship between the three components of the theoretical framework.

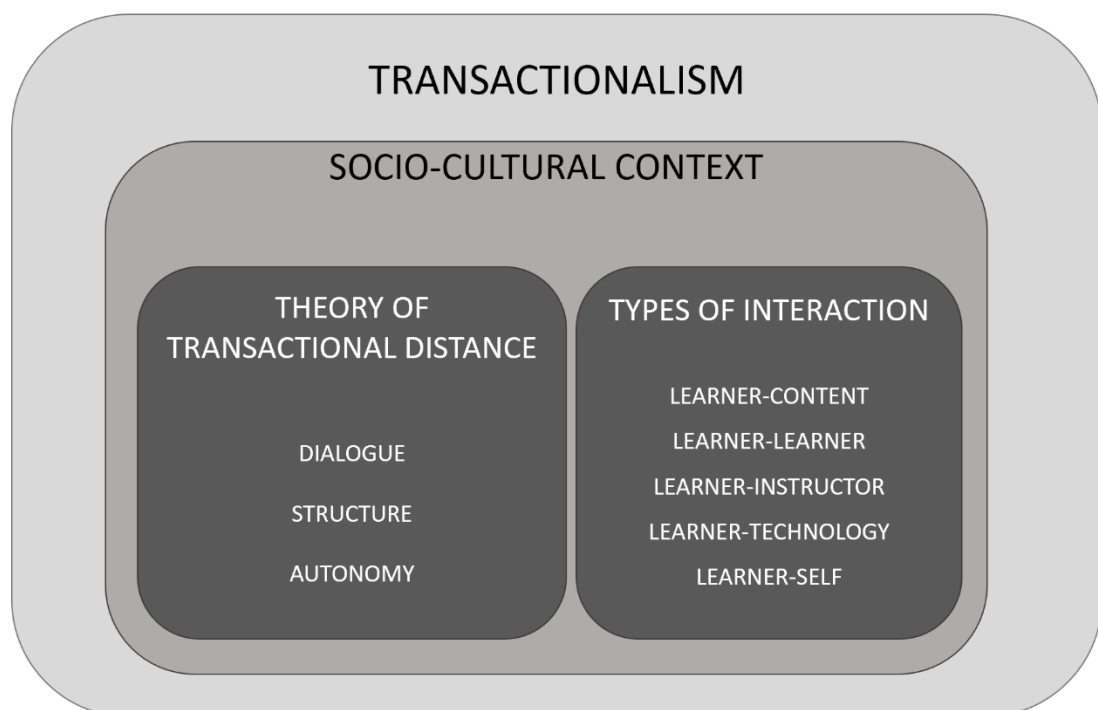


Figure 3.1 The interrelating elements of the theoretical framework

As the visual representation (Figure 3.1) shows, the theory of transactionalism provides the space in which the other models are situated. As I will argue, TTD and Tol are often misrepresented or wrongly conflated.

3.1 The premise of the current study

The fundamental premise of this thesis is an examination of the nature of interactions engaged in by ODLs and how these impact on and are impacted by their experience of the separation between themselves and the academy. As I have already argued in the introduction and literature chapters, interaction is often simplistically interpreted as a collection of academic activities. I argued how an institutionally bound quantitative focus on ODE interaction neglects the interactions occurring in the local contexts in which postgraduate ODLs are situated and which are important elements of their ODE experience. The literature review also highlighted how ODL characteristics, competencies and attitudes play a significant role in shaping the way in which ODLs benefit from their learning, but studies of these phenomena are equally quantitative and institutionally bound and influenced by deficit and economic perspectives of DE. I argue that to better understand postgraduate ODLs and how they experience the separation between themselves and the academy, it is necessary to investigate them within their local contexts. In so doing, we can shed light on how their situatedness impacts on their experience via the interaction they engage in. My study seeks to achieve this by examining the interactions, or interrelationships between the ODL, their local context, and their experience of the separation between themselves and the academy, and vice versa. In other words, I seek to examine the bi-directional relationship between the

individual and their environment, which I interpret as a non-dualist relationship. I therefore employ Dewey's theory of transactionalism as a guiding construct throughout my research design and data interpretation.

3.1.1 Dewey's transactionalism

Transactionalism is a theory of interaction in its broadest sense. According to Dewey, transaction is not simply that action occurring in a business, or commercial sense, but a deeper, more fundamental concept of scientific inquiry. John Dewey developed his theory over many years, and the notion of transaction is fully developed in a later work, published in 1946 and 1960, with Arthur Bentley. They were writing to reset the paradigm of scientific inquiry, which hitherto had been grounded in a dualistic set of beliefs, aligning to the likes of Newton and Descartes (Dewey & Bentley, 1960). This dualistic paradigm held that individuals or organisms and their environment are separate elements which interact in a uni-directional way (Miller, 1963). Dewey highlighted the limitations of this standpoint using examples from physics, such as Descartes' corpuscular theory of light, which claimed that light was comprised of individual particles, and Newtonian mechanics as a closed system not accounting for environmental influences. Dewey argued that organisms and their environment are bi-directional 'indissoluble phases or aspects, not separate elements, of the transactional event' (Piatt, 1955, p. 301). He espoused a non-dualistic ontology wherein the observer and the observed are not distinct entities, but instead are part of the 'organism-in-environment-as-a-whole' (Dewey & Bentley, 1946, p. 511). He understood the environment to be enmeshed with the person:

“Environment” is not something around and about human activities in an external sense: it is their *medium*, or *milieu*, in the sense in which a *medium* is *intermediate* in the execution or carrying *out* of human activities, as well as being the channel *through* which they move and the vehicle *by* which they go on. (Dewey & Bentley, 1960, p. 185)

This specific understanding of certain terms and concepts was a key aspect of Dewey’s stance. Among other terms related to scientific inquiry, he claimed that interaction foregrounded the separation of elements from their environment for the sake of inquiry, and therefore belonged to the dualist paradigm (Rosenblatt, 1985, p. 97). The term ‘transaction’, on the other hand is ‘unfractured observation’ (Dewey & Bentley, 1946, p. 508) which does not seek to isolate and detach constituent elements or entities (p.509); it is a non-dualist ontology.

3.1.2 Transactionalism and DE

Regarding education, Dewey viewed this as a democratic problem-solving process between teacher and learner (Dewey, 2004). We see echoes of this in Garrison’s (1989, 1993) conception of the educational transaction as teacher-learner relationship discussed in the previous chapter. While Dewey did not use the term, transaction at this stage in his writing, ‘a relationship between learner and educator as an interpretive transformational process’ (Sutinen, Kallioniemi, & Pihlström, 2015, p. 341) clearly reflects his non-dualist notion of transaction. He later asserted ‘an experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between an individual and his [*sic*] environment’ (LW 13, p.25 as cited in Na & Song, 2014, p. 1033) and that in order to be educative, the experience must be reflected on. He

used the terms, continuity, the formative or cumulative effect of experiences; and interaction, which later became transaction and referred to the experiential process (Na & Song, 2014).

If we consider the separation of DE as a 'psychological and communications space', as does Moore's (1993, p. 22) TTD, discussed in the next section, and, if we view this from the perspective of Dewey's conceptualisation of transaction, we can see that, where there is psychological and communications distance, there can be no transaction. For the 'transformational process' of education to occur, there must be a relationship between instructor and student. If DE is characterised by separation and miscommunication, then the educational transaction will be hindered. However, this stance is grounded in the assumption that for learning to happen, teaching is necessary, and that education is characterised by the learner-teacher relationship. Although this may initially appear a restricted, teacher-centric view, if we interpret 'teacher' more broadly to encompass any person, situation, or object, experienced by the learner, then this act of experiencing, or transaction, becomes a more holistic process in which learning is advanced. In this sense, the separation of teacher and learner in DE becomes less significant and the local context and individual experiences of the ODL take on a much more important role.

3.1.3 Transactionalism and agency

The concept of transaction can be seen in Bandura's 'emergent interactive agency' (Bandura, 1989, 1999, 2001), which also asserts a non-dualist interrelationship between the individual and their environment. Bandura, like Dewey, saw people neither as completely autonomous from, nor as completely at the mercy of the

environment, he asserted that ‘internal personal factors in the form of cognitive, affective, and biological events, behavioural patterns, and environmental influences all operate as interacting determinants that influence one another bidirectionally’ (Bandura, 2001, p. 15). In this way, personal agency operates within ‘agentic transactions’ in which ‘people are producers as well as products of social systems’ (Bandura, 2001, p. 15). So, for an educational, or any, transaction to occur, there must be a degree of agency or control at play.

This further emphasises the need to consider the role of the environment in which the learner exists and engages in learning. If there is a close, mutually dependent relationship between organism (in our case, the learner) and the environment, then it follows that the learners’ milieu is an important mediator of their learning. While this is becoming a major focus for campus-based learning (see, for example, Temple, 2014) it is largely overlooked in ODE. As we have seen, ODE emphasises interactions between people and learning content, but rarely factors in the local environment in which the learner is situated, either in course design or in empirical research. Where it does feature in the literature, it is often presented from a deficit perspective in terms of sociocultural barriers to using the internet (Rabiee, Nazarian, & Gharibshaeyan, 2013), language barriers (Natal, Jimenez, & Htway, 2020) and home, work and family distractions (Mahmodi & Ebrahimzade, 2015). This may be because the ODL’s environment is largely beyond the control of the online instructor and course designer, and so efforts are focused into those factors that can be manipulated and controlled such as the content, communication, look and feel, task design. However, from the transactional perspective, this approach tends towards

the dualistic, treating the academic space and the learner within it as a closed system of 'inalterable particles' (Dewey & Bentley, 1946, p. 514), isolated from wider environmental factors. It thus risks neglecting arguably the biggest influencing factor of the ODL's experience.

I intend to open this closed system in order to see the learner and their interactions fully as aspects or phases of their milieu in, through, and by which they act. My research will undertake a 'transactional observation of "the organism-in-environment-as-a-whole"' (Dewey & Bentley, 1946, p. 511) in order to explore the learners and their learning, situated in their local setting, or in Dewey's words, 'the seeing together, when research requires it, of what before had been seen in separations and held severally apart' (Dewey & Bentley, 1946, p. 514). Where previous research has taken a dualist approach, by separating, measuring and observing the interactions, my study aims to bring the aspects of the educational transaction together in an 'unfractured observation'.

3.2 Theories of online and distance learning

I argued in the introductory chapter of this thesis, that ODE is lacking a current theory base; this claim requires further explanation with reference to recent theories of online and elearning. Along with the development of communications technologies, and their uptake and use in education, there have arisen certain new theories of learning in a digital environment. Of these, connectivism (Siemens, 2005, 2018) in particular, emphasises the impact of computer technology on the way we learn. Siemens claims that the digital age enables learning to transcend the individual to become enacted across spaces connected by technology; knowledge, or

learning is not a fixed state, but is continuously created and recreated in the connections we make (Siemens, 2005, 2018). In this way, connectivism shares similarities with distributed cognition, which also acknowledges the externalised nature of learning across people, places and objects (Cowley & Vallée-Tourangeau, 2013; Dabbagh, 2005; Hewitt & Scardamalia, 1998). Likewise, networked learning recognises the collective and social nature of knowledge construction facilitated by modern digital technologies (De Laat & Ryberg, 2018; Goodyear, Banks, Hodgson, & McConnell, 2004). What these theories have in common is their emphasis on how the learning process is impacted by digital technologies; they do not have the reality of the distance learner and their experience of the separation of distance education as a central tenet. These theories may apply equally to a range of formal and informal learning contexts, on the continuum between in-person and distance, where internet technology is used. Therefore, while they are certainly of relevance in the field of DE, they are more accurately described as theories of digital rather than distance education.

Another widely known theory of online learning, which is more aligned to DE (although not exclusively), is the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison, 2011; Garrison & Anderson, 2003). Garrison and Anderson also acknowledge the potential transformation of education and learning brought about by the digital age, and the increased capacity for communication and interaction across space and time (Garrison & Anderson, 2003, p. xi). Their framework presents a tool with which to conceptualise technology-mediated learning as a 'collaborative constructivist' (Garrison & Anderson, 2003, p. 12) phenomenon, in preference to a transmission

model. Their underpinning principle being that for an elearning event to be successful, three elements are required: cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence, which combine to effect an educational transaction. In this way, despite the links to Dewey's transactionalism, the community of inquiry framework is concerned with the educational transaction as enacted within a formal teaching and learning activity, designed and led by the teacher, occurring within an elearning environment. It is less concerned with the holistic experience of being an ODL and the inevitable physical, temporal and psychological separation associated with it.

The focus of my thesis, being this separation, or TD, as experienced by individual ODLs, led me to identify TTD as an appropriate one on which to base my research design. TTD is concerned with distance or separation as the defining characteristic of DE, unlike theories of online and digital learning described here, which centre on the affordances of interactive technologies and their role in reshaping the educational experience as conceived of within the academic space. TTD seeks to understand the interplay and balance of factors which contribute to the increase or decrease of TD and will be discussed next.

3.3 Transactional Distance

TTD has its origins in 1972 as a theory of DE proposed by Michael Grahame Moore (1972). TTD states that 'distance education is not simply a geographic separation of learners and teachers, but, more importantly, is a pedagogical concept' (M. G. Moore, 1993, p. 22). This pedagogical concept denotes the 'teacher-learner relationships [...] separated by space and/or time' (M. G. Moore, 1993, p. 22). TD is premised on the idea that DE is characterised by the separation of the teacher and

learner in space and time. This separation comprises a psychological as well as physical and temporal aspect; this means that TD is a ‘psychological and communications space to be crossed, a space of potential misunderstanding between the inputs of instructor and those of the learner’ (M. G. Moore, 1993, p. 22). Consequently, DE requires a particular set of learning and teaching behaviours comprising programme structure, instructional dialogue and learner autonomy, which, when implemented appropriately, can reduce TD. The extent of the TD is a function of these three variables (see Table 3.1), each of which will now be examined. It is important to note at this point, that although the three clusters are often described and analysed separately, they do not exist as separate entities in reality; they are tightly interrelated and discussion of one, necessarily entails reference to the others.

Variable	Characteristics	High TD	Low TD
Instructional dialogue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • teaching behaviour • between teacher + learner • constructive • supportive 	low dialogue	high dialogue
Programme structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • organisation of curriculum • determined by academy 	high structure	low structure
Learner autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learner control over curriculum • independence 	high autonomy	low autonomy

Table 3.1 Moore's Theory of Transactional Distance

3.3.1 Dialogue

Dialogue, according to Moore, is the major determinant of TD and is used with three specific meanings: firstly, it is instructional dialogue, that is between the teacher and learner; secondly, it is used as a positive, constructive form of interaction (which he views as a more neutral, generic term); thirdly, it is characterised by a supportive,

scaffolding type of communication (as opposed to an intellectual exchange). In fact, Moore's words, 'the direction of the dialogue in an educational relationship is towards the improved understanding of the student' (M. G. Moore, 1993, p. 24), belies a uni-directional, teacher-centric perspective where the learner passively receives 'improved understanding' from the instructor, although there is recognition of the ability for the learner to respond 'internally'. Moore acknowledges a range of environmental, personal and academic factors, which influence the relative quality of the dialogue and he specifies that dialogue can also be bi-directional. Moore later recognised the affordances of teleconferencing, which allows for multidirectional dialogue between learners (M. G. Moore, 1993). However, this has always been a lesser focus and the theory remains teacher- and teaching-centric.

Shearer and Park (2019) identify two alternative dimensions of dialogue: the negotiation of programme content, and the social construction of knowledge. Neither of these are explicitly stated by Moore, although the relationship between structure and dialogue implies that a degree of negotiation comes into play when structure is low, as will be seen in the next section. However, the function of dialogue as a means to co-construct knowledge, is not an element discussed by Moore.

3.3.2 Structure

The way in which a programme of teaching is organised, delivered and assessed constitutes structure in TTD (M. G. Moore, 1993, p. 26). A programme structure may be more or less rigid, depending on the extent that a learner can influence the programme, which in turn, is largely dependent on the nature and quantity of

dialogue, and the individual learner's autonomy. So, a pre-written course design, in which learning objectives, content, resources, sequence of tasks, pace and assessment are decided and prepared in advance, by the academy would be a highly structured, or rigid programme; whereas a co-constructed individual learning pathway developed according to the learner's needs, preferences and local context, would be a more flexible programme structure. Clearly, a co-constructed loosely structured programme requires a high amount of dialogue, while a rigid structure reduces opportunity for dialogue. In this way, dialogue and structure, as conceived by Moore, are often represented in an inverse relationship (see Figure 3.2), with highly structured, non-dialogic programmes engendering high TD, while TD is minimal in flexible dialogic programmes (M. G. Moore, 1993, p. 27).

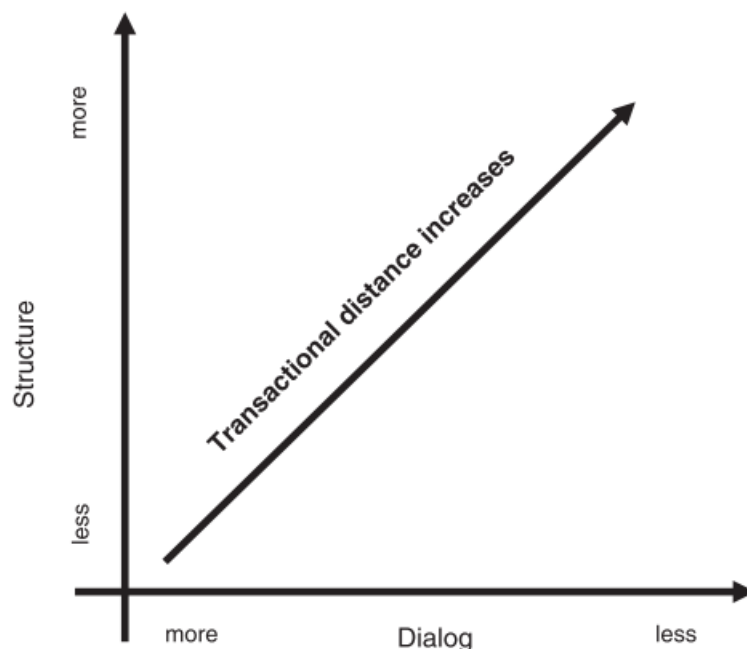


Figure 3.2 Relationship between structure and dialogue (Moore, 2013, p.71)

3.3.3 Autonomy

Arising out of challenges to behaviourist dominated models of DE, where the teacher had full control, learner autonomy was presented as a more democratic, co-

constructive approach (M. G. Moore, 1993, p. 31). In TTD, learner autonomy denotes the amount of control the learner has over the curriculum and it aligns to Knowles' adult learning theory, which stresses the importance of promoting self-directed learning among adult learners (Knowles, 2015). However, there is an additional understanding of autonomy evident in TTD, that of self-efficacy, or self-sufficiency, whereby the learner is able to study apart from the guidance of the instructor. It is this sense of autonomy that Moore refers to when he asserts that autonomous learners are more able to cope with low dialogue and high structure, whereas more dialogue and a more flexible structure is required by dependent learners. Clearly, the first sense of autonomy as having control over the curriculum, is not compatible with a rigidly structured programme. The relationship between dialogue, structure and autonomy as self-sufficiency is represented diagrammatically in Figure 3.3.

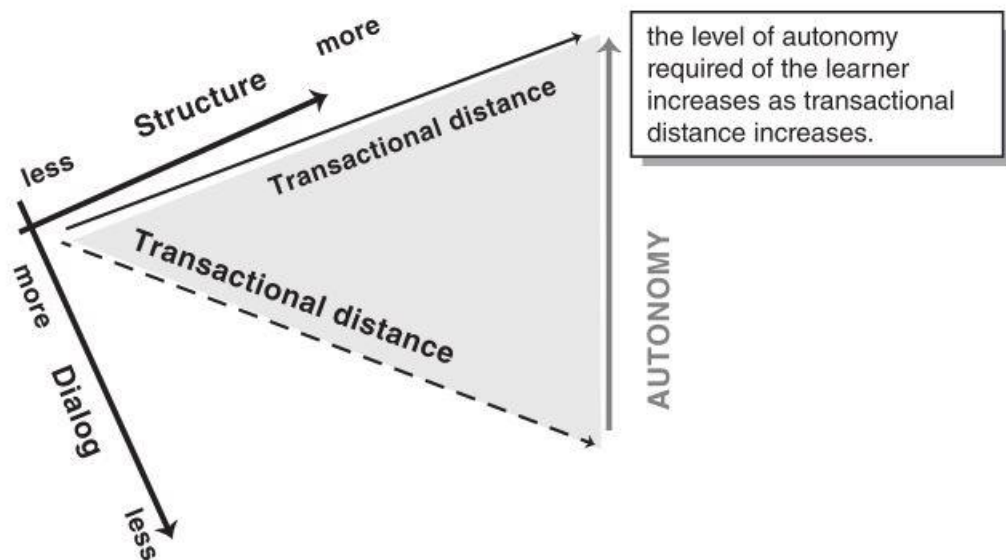


Figure 3.3 Relationship between dialogue, structure and autonomy (Moore, 2013, p. 74)

The first understanding of autonomy as control, has gained more ground recently in line with communications technologies and connectivist conceptions of learning,

which promote cooperative learning, and reduce the centrality of the teacher in the ODE process (Dron, 2019).

3.3.4 TD as a relative construct

Although TD is not particular to DE, traditionally, the lack of dialogue in DE results in a higher TD, which suggests that Moore considers dialogue to be the key variable in determining TD. Indeed, he describes it as a ‘communications space . . . a space of potential misunderstanding between the inputs of instructor and those of the learner’ (M. G. Moore, 1993, p. 22). So, not only is communication significant in this concept, but more specifically, it is teacher-learner communication and through maximising this, it is suggested that the ‘space’ can be crossed. However, a range of factors impact on dialogue, not least being the learner’s personality and environment, as Moore highlights ‘transactional distance is a continuous rather than a concrete variable, a relative rather than an absolute term’ (M. G. Moore, 1993, pp. 22-23). In other words, different learners and teachers will experience TD differently according to individual characteristics and circumstances. This indicates the complex nature of technology-mediated interaction and the need for deeper understanding of it and the personal, emotional and environmental factors influencing it. The environmental influence features significantly in TTD with regard to Moore’s choice of the term ‘transactional’. He acknowledges the influence of Dewey’s (1960) non-dualist perspective of transaction defined as ‘the interplay among the environment, the individuals and the patterns of behaviours’ (Boyd & Apps, 1980, p.5 as cited in M. G. Moore, 1993, p. 22). If we consider DE as a transaction in this sense, the notion of TD becomes more nuanced and we can begin to see what Moore was trying to

convey by 'pedagogical concept' and 'psychological and communications space' (M. G. Moore, 1993, p. 22). If the transaction, or interplay, between teacher and learner is characterised by separation in space and/or time, then the TD becomes more of a barrier.

3.3.5 The development of TTD

TTD has been lauded as a global theory of DE (Gokool-Ramdoo, 2008), denigrated as a tautology (Gorsky & Caspi, 2005), and described as 'inherently fuzzy' (Dron, 2005). More often, it has been modified, amended, and revisited according to a range of contexts and applications including being conflated with types of interaction, (see table 3.2), reviewed in light of synchronous (Falloon, 2011) and mobile (Park, 2011) technologies, extended to incorporate human and structural factors (Goel et al., 2012), reconceptualised through the lens of realism (Giossos et al., 2009), and reinterpreted as transactional control (Dron, 2005).

Despite its origins as a theory of independent learning being almost 50 years ago, and its current form dating back to 1993, TTD remains a key theoretical model used by researchers in the field of DE. While it is true that the notion of a communications gap between teacher and learner is arguably less of an issue in today's DE with the interactive affordances of digital and internet technologies, the narrative of loneliness, isolation and attrition persists. TTD remains relevant today as it describes the purpose of DE as 'the methodology of structuring courses and managing dialogue between teacher and learner to bridge that gap through communications technology' (M. G. Moore, 2019, p. 34). It remains distinct from more recent theories of digital education in that it is fundamentally a theory of distance, it arose within

the context of the correspondence courses during the 1970s, where teaching and learning were enacted separately, its purpose being to reduce the psychological effects of that separation. Subsequent theories of learning developed within the digital age such as connectivism, networked learning and community of inquiry, assume the presence of interaction or connectedness as their starting point, while TTD acknowledges its potential absence. Conversely, the importance afforded dialogue and its role in reducing TD, along with interrelated factors of structure and autonomy, is arguably one of the reasons for the continued utility of the theory in ODE research. M. G. Moore (2019) points out the ongoing relevance of TTD and the interplay of dialogue, structure and autonomy in a digital society:

the challenge for teachers in designing courses, either individually or collectively as members of a course team, is to design environments and experiences for learning that takes advantage of social networks as well as the infinity of online resources by providing the structure that allows numerous pathways to common goals, with collaborative tasks that stimulate knowledge sharing, while allowing each student to personalize the experience. (p.41)

Nonetheless, it is still claimed by some that it lacks empirical application and validation (Huang et al., 2016) and that it lacks a consensual understanding and interpretation of its elements (Giossos et al., 2009). There have been few attempts to examine the theory or any of its constituent elements in depth to advance understandings of it. Exceptions include Dron's (2005) reconceptualisation as a theory of transactional control, in which choice plays a key role; and Shearer's (2009)

PhD thesis, which offered a refinement of the dialogue element of the theory.

Indeed, more recently, Shearer and Park (2019, p. 37) call for further research into the elements of TD in order to develop the theory. However, these exceptions remain grounded in the systems perspective of DE, they do not approach theory development from a learner perspective.

Many empirical applications of TTD have comprised attempts to quantify and measure it using a range of scales (see Table 3.2 for an overview of these). An early example being that of Chen (2001a), who categorised TD into instructor-learner, learner-learner, learner-content and learner-interface. This conflated TTD with Moore's later typology of interaction and, together with Zhang's (2003) four-part scale, gave rise to a general tendency for subsequent studies to combine TTD with types of interaction (ToI). This combination of TTD with ToI is arguably misguided if we consider that the original definition of TD is the psychological gap between teacher and learner. However, in line with Dron (2019) I argue in this thesis that the teacher should be understood not as one individual, but as a range of social and environmental factors impacting on a learner's developing understanding. This more holistic interpretation of teacher enables a wider application of TTD to the interactions engaged in by the learner. Nonetheless, the conflation of TTD and ToI by studies reviewed in this section, appears to be a simple misapplication, or misunderstanding of the dialogue element of TTD as interaction, which is then subdivided into the three types. This represents an inaccurate interpretation of dialogue, which Moore specifically differentiated from interaction. This

misinterpretation also hints that TD can be equated to general satisfaction as it neglects the elements of structure and autonomy.

Author(s)	Scale	Elements measured	Type of measure	Number of items
Chen, 2001		learner-teacher learner-student learner-content learner-interface	self-report 5-point Likert scale	23
Zhang, 2003	Scale of Transactional Distance	student-teacher student-student student-content student-interface	self-report 5-point Likert scale	31
Wengrowicz, Dori & Dori, 2014	TD questionnaire	TD-communication TD-understanding TD-satisfaction	self-report 5-point Likert scale	30
Paul, Swart, Zhang, & MacLeod, 2015	Revised Scale of Transactional Distance	student-teacher student-student student-content	self-report 5-point Likert scale	12
Huang, Chandra, Depaolo, Cribbs, & Simmons, 2015		Closeness Shared understanding Perceived learning Learner-learner interaction Learner-instructor interaction Learner-content interaction Learner-interface interaction Independence of Learning Study Habits	self-report 7-point Likert scale	103
Weidlich & Bastiaens, 2018	TDSTECH	student-technology	self-report 5-point Likert scale	12
Yilmaz & Kesser, 2017; Karaoglan Yilmaz, 2017	Zhang plus environment	student-teacher student-student student-content student-interface student-environment	self-report 5-point Likert scale	38
Giossos, Koutsouba & Mavroidis, 2016	Learner-Teacher Transactional Distance Scale	student-teacher (co-understanding; awareness)	self-report 5-point Likert scale	32
Ekwunife-Orakwue & Teng, 2014	adapted from Strachota, 2003	student-teacher student-student student-content student-interface	self-report 5-point Likert scale	29

Horzum, 2011	Perceived Transactional Distance in Blended Learning Environments Scale	Dialogue Autonomy Structure Flexibility Content Organization Student Control	self-report 5-point Likert scale	38
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Table 3.2 Overview of Measures of Transactional Distance

3.3.6 Factors influencing perceived TD

Although TD is a personal, relative, context-dependent construct (M. G. Moore, 1993), and so, attempts to quantify individual perceptions of it are necessarily limited, such quantitative measures can go some way to providing insights into relationships between and influences of a range of factors. The following sections review some of the empirical literature which seek to identify factors impacting on and ways to mitigate the effects of TD; these comprise demographics, technology, pedagogy and environmental influences.

3.3.6.1 Demographics

There are indications that TD is impacted by culture and ethnicity, with Caucasian students generally perceiving higher TD than non-Caucasian (Huang et al., 2016) and more collective cultures, as defined by Hofstede (1986) preferring high structure and high dialogue programmes (Al-Harthi, 2010b). There is also some evidence that older students perceive lower TD than their younger counterparts, which is tentatively attributed to their higher levels of autonomy (Huang et al., 2016). There is not yet conclusive evidence regarding the impact of gender on TD, with Bolliger and Halupa (2018) finding some support for the influence of gender, whereas (Horzum, 2011) did not. There is also no agreement on the impact of prior ODE experience with Huang et al. (2016) finding no effect yet Benson and Samarawickrema (2009) suggest

that familiarity with technology enhanced learning environments may correlate to reduced TD. However, Goel et al. (2012) found a strong correlation between TD and students' intention to pursue further online learning, which suggests prior experience, does have an impact.

3.3.6.2 Technology

An area in which there is a more convincing and unified body of evidence is the impact of technology on TD. The need to achieve an appropriate fit between technology and content is paramount for a positive learning experience (Best & Conceição, 2017; Goel et al., 2012; Weidlich & Bastiaens, 2018). Platforms which engender social interaction, have been found to reduce perceptions of TD (Karaoglan Yilmaz, 2017; Quong, Snider, & Early, 2018). Generally, media-rich technologies such as the use of multi-modal content can reduce perceived TD (Dockter, 2016; Huang et al., 2016) and ODE teaching has been found to make more use of this than lecture-based instruction (Benton, Li, Gross, Pallett, & Webster, 2013). In the same way, feedback format can also lower impressions of TD with video feedback having a higher impact than image and text-based feedback (Karaoglan Yilmaz & Yilmaz, 2019). The positive effect of such tools has been attributed to their ability to establish social presence (Dockter, 2016). Synchronous communication platforms help to reduce perceptions of TD (Falloon, 2011; Pattillo, 2007; Yilmaz & Keser, 2017), which initially seems logical due to the increased dialogue enabled by these technologies, however, at the same time, synchronous communication necessarily requires a higher degree of structure and can therefore impact negatively on autonomy (Falloon, 2011).

3.3.6.3 Pedagogy

Pedagogy is a predictor of TTD (Wengrowicz, 2014) and with the crux of TD being dialogue (Goel et al., 2012), the role of the instructor in promoting interaction is key (Dockter, 2016; Ribeiro et al., 2018). However, as will be seen later in this chapter, simply increasing opportunities for interaction is not sufficient, ODE instructors need to tailor the relative quantities and types of interaction according to their learners' needs, and find an appropriate balance between dialogue, structure and autonomy (Benson & Samarawickrema, 2009; Bolliger & Halupa, 2018; M. G. Moore, 1993). Identifying this balance is one of the most challenging aspects of TD due to the fact that it is an individual and perceptual construct (Giossos et al., 2009). Some of the challenges to Moore's original theory and the relationships between the three variables, are based on the dialogue – structure inverse relationship. Figure 3.2 above shows the inverse relationship between dialogue and structure, where, as dialogue increases, structure, and therefore TD, decreases. This is one of the criticisms levied by Gorsky and Caspi (2005), who pointed out the whole theory can be reduced to the tautological idea that more dialogue equals less TD. However, Benson and Samarawickrema (2009) found this relationship to be supported only in situations where TD is at a medium level, such as blended learning; they claim that high TD situations, such as purely online programmes, can benefit from high structure as well as high dialogue. Similarly, Huang et al. (2016) found of all the combinations tested, high dialogue and structure equated to the lowest levels of TD. This high dialogue high structure scenario, runs the risk of reducing autonomy, too little of which can impact negatively on the social construction of knowledge

(Karaoglan Yilmaz, 2017), although this too is not a straightforward relationship as requiring too much autonomy from learners who are not ready, has the effect of increasing TD (Karaoglan Yilmaz, 2017). ODE instructors can scaffold learners' autonomy at the same time as increasing dialogue and thereby reducing TD, by assigning specific roles and responsibilities to learners during online discussions, (Oztok, 2016; Yilmaz & Karaoglan Yilmaz, 2018).

Further instructional strategies for reducing TD include building social presence through sharing and encouraging learners to share experiences (Dockter, 2016), which can serve to counter the lower rapport reported by ODLs (Benton et al., 2013). Providing feedback, encouragement and praise, particularly formative as opposed to summative feedback can also serve to reduce TD (Maliotaki, 2019), thus corroborating the idea that ongoing, affective teacher presence is a key contributor to reduced TD.

3.3.6.4 Institution/Environment

There has been some evidence, albeit sporadic and uncorroborated, of additional environment factors impacting on ODLs' perceptions of TD for example, the relative prestige of the learning institution (Bolliger & Halupa, 2018) and multi-institutional programmes (Best & Conceição, 2017). Class size does not appear to be relevant (Benton et al., 2013; Huang et al., 2016) and neither does the number of logins to the system (Horzum, 2011).

3.3.7 Summary

Taken together, the literature grounded in TTD reviewed here, is perhaps characterised more by divergence than by consensus, with a lack of agreement on even the fundamental impact of TD on engagement, satisfaction, progress and learning (for example, Hopper (2000) found that perceived TD was not an impediment to achievement or satisfaction). This could be said to provide support for the theory, which, in its essence is a relative, not an absolute phenomenon.

While there does seem to be some consensus on the impact of technology and the potential of media-rich technologies to reduce TD, this is also dependent on the preferences, familiarity and confidence of those engaging with it. While it is often asserted that interpersonal relations are key to reducing TD, the exact nature of these relationships is a complex, context-dependent personal construct. There is currently not enough convincing empirical support for any firm statements, or principles of TD to be categorically affirmed. This is due to several factors including:

- advances in technologies, particularly media-rich communication technologies, fundamentally alter the basic precepts of TTD (originally dialogue referred to that between instructor and learner as inter-learner dialogue was not feasible prior to interactive Web 2.0 technology)
- the diversity of applications, interpretations and modifications (the conflation of TD with types of interaction, for example) within the literature as well as the differing contexts (purely online, blended, singular online modules in otherwise face to face programmes) in which it is evaluated

- the preponderance of quantitative measures of the variables of TTD which rely on self-report instruments and fail to offer deeper insights into the whys and wherefores of perceived TD
- the lack of uniformity of what to measure and how (some studies seek to establish the relationships between variables, while others focus on the impact of one or more variables on satisfaction, and yet others aim to understand if and/or how TD generally affects achievement)

Collectively, the literature outlines a critical need for further rich qualitative investigations of learner experiences which can help to illuminate the subtleties and perhaps the essence of how TD is lived by contemporary ODLs. To use the words of Shearer and Park (2019, p. 35) 'only by constantly challenging and testing the theory can we come to a deeper understanding of the nuances that may exist in an educational exchange at a distance'. This provides the rationale for my own study in which I re-examine TTD through the lived experience narratives of postgraduate ODLs.

3.4 Types of interaction

Given that interaction has become such a crucial aspect of DE pedagogy (Anderson, 2003), attaining consensus of understanding, application and evaluation is imperative (M. G. Moore, 1989). This section introduces the third element of the underpinning theoretical framework, that of interaction types. I begin by introducing a popular and extensively researched typology, that of Moore's three types of interaction. I then introduce some additional types suggested by subsequent scholars.

3.4.1 Moore's three types of interaction

In a similar vein to Dewey's attempts to regain a common understanding of terms and concepts 'having acquired a multiplicity of meanings', Moore (1989, p. 1) set out his typology of interaction in the context of DE. Moore distinguished between three types of interaction which the DL engages in: learner-content (LCI), learner-instructor (LII) and learner-learner (LLI). Each of these will now be reviewed along with the associated empirical literature. It is worth remembering at this point that Moore developed his typology in a pre-digital context, yet it is often applied in contemporary studies of ODE.

3.4.1.1 Learner-content interaction

LCI is the 'core of distance learning' (Ekwunife-Orakwue & Teng, 2014, p. 425), it is 'a defining characteristic of education'; 'without it there cannot be education' (M. G. Moore, 1989, p. 1). Content, refers to the subject material, and 'it is the process of intellectually interacting with content that results in changes in the learner's understanding, the learner's perspective, or the cognitive structures of the learner's mind' (M. G. Moore, 1989, p. 1). This transformational process resembles a Deweyan transaction; the relationship is two-way as the learner is altered through engaging with the content, and the content then becomes altered as the learner views it from a changed perspective. This type of transformative interaction, can lead to learner-self interaction as a result of 'internalized conversation' (Holmberg, 1995, p. 48), or reflection; this type of interaction is discussed in more detail later. In fact, Holmberg's notion of 'guided didactic conversation' (Holmberg, 1995) suggests 'it is the responsibility of the course developer to create a simulated conversation with

the learner through the materials' (White, 2005, p. 57). Hence, particularly before the advent of interactive technologies, the course content served a vital communicative function and is closely related to LII as it mediated this type of interaction. So already, we begin to see the problems associated with attempts to fragment and categorise interactions.

Despite featuring less often in research into ODE interaction (Xiao, 2017), LCI is valued over LII (Rhode, 2009), occurs more frequently than other types of interaction and has been shown to impact positively on achievement (Ekwunife-Orakwue & Teng, 2014) and satisfaction (Cho & Cho, 2017). There are claims that LCI might potentially replace LII (Morrison & Anglin, 2012; Rhode, 2009), or at least that media-rich content might compensate for low interpersonal interaction (Ekwunife-Orakwue & Teng, 2014). This has been linked to quantity, with higher amounts of LCI, as measured by amount of time spent on the virtual learning environment, correlating to higher grades (T. D. Zimmerman, 2012). However, Zimmerman's (2012) study was not able to categorically demonstrate causality, and therefore cannot rule out the explanation that higher achieving learners are those who spend more time interacting with content. Conversely, a negative correlation between LCI and achievement was identified by Joksimović, Gašević, Loughin, Kovanović, and Hatala (2015), although, again, causality was not proved (p.215). In fact, this latter study, raises important methodological questions regarding how the authors differentiated between learner-system interactions, which they claim positively affects achievement, and LCIs, from analysing the VLE log data alone. The challenge with these sorts of attempts to measure and quantify LCI in the context of ODE

programmes, is that, unlike LII and LLI, which can only happen via the online platform, LCI can occur offline, as the learner engages in additional reading of downloaded, printed or copied materials, or materials located online but external to the institutional VLE. In restricting their analyses to quantitative measures of technologically-mediated interactions, these studies risk oversimplifying and overstating the impact of institutionally bound interactions and overlooking the interactions between learner and content which happen beyond the VLE. These are important potential areas of investigation with regard to ODE interactions (Agudo-Peregrina, Iglesias-Pradas, Conde-González, & Hernández-García, 2014). Not only this, but there is also need for a deeper, more granular understanding of the manner in which ODLs interact with content in order to inform the design of effective and appropriate ODE materials (Xiao, 2017).

3.4.1.2 Learner-instructor interaction

The second type of interaction is that between the learner and teacher, or other expert, of the subject matter. This has been referred to variously as 'guided didactic conversation' (Holmberg, 1995), 'learning conversations' (Candi, Harri-Augstein & Thomas, 1985 as cited in Holmberg, 1995, pp. 50-51) 'tutorial-in-print' (Rowntree, 1986 as cited in Holmberg, 1995, pp. 51-52), and 'instructional dialogue' (M. G. Moore, 1993). This can be uni-directional from the instructor to the learner via media such as text or audio/visual presentation; in this sense, for the interaction to be considered a transformative process or transaction, the learner must engage in internalised conversations. This type of interaction can also be bi-directional either asynchronously via correspondence, where the learner responds to tasks or requests

support, or synchronously via telecommunications. Here, the interaction can be considered transactional as the relationship is 'mutual and reciprocal' (Dewey & Bentley, 1960, p. 193). It is important to remember at this point, that these ideas were grounded in pre-digital DE, when the distinction between LCI and LII was more blurred due to the lack of opportunity for direct LII. Unlike contemporary LII mediated by digital technologies, the instructor was more reliant on communicating with learners via the pre-prepared learning materials.

Just as with studies of LCI, there is empirical evidence suggesting LII has a positive impact on satisfaction, particularly over LLI (Cho & Cho, 2017; Rhode, 2009; Yunjin & Soon Min, 2016). However, as highlighted previously, the precise nature of these interactions can reveal more useful insights than the mere fact of their existence. In a recent literature review focussing on the educator's role in ODE, Terblanché (2015) highlighted the preferred facilitative rather than authoritarian nature of LII, in order to nurture learner autonomy, which is a key factor in ODE. This echoes Boling et al. (2012) whose participants found teacher-centred didactic approaches unhelpful for a deep learning experience online. Regular facilitatory interactions between teacher and student are particularly important for ODLs with visual impairments due to the additional barriers faced by these students (Yunjin & Soon Min, 2016). Ethnicity can also impact on learners' perceptions, with certain cultures (Al-Harhi, 2010b) and minority groups (Ke & Kwak, 2013) placing a higher value on this type of interaction.

One compelling study found that the effects of increased LII were largely contradictory to expectations and previous studies in that it did not improve

achievement, retention or satisfaction and in fact had a negative effect in some instances (J. Moore, 2014). J. Moore suggests the enforced increase in quantity of instructor responses to forum posts may have resulted in poorer quality interaction. This would seem to be corroborated by Glazier (2016), whose focus on increasing rapport rather than volume of interactions produced positive results. However, the quantitative nature of J. Moore's study and its focus on discussion forum contributions, do not fully explain the findings. While most studies of interaction in ODE do not find such negative correlations, many are inconclusive and fail to ascertain how interaction can impact learning (Watts, 2016) or they prioritise statistical correlations between quantity of interaction and achievement over quality and the nature of communication (Abrami et al., 2011). This points to a need for more in-depth qualitative investigations of how learners experience interactions both within and beyond the course environment.

3.4.1.3 Learner-learner interaction

Finally, a relatively recent phenomenon in DE, is LLI, whereby learners communicate with each other. Prior to modern communications technology, this type of interaction was not feasible for DLs and yet, particularly for adult learners, it is a valuable enhancement to the learning process (M. G. Moore, 1989). Going further, Smyth (2011, p. 125) applauds the affordances of video technology 'which enables interaction to move beyond learner-to-content and towards learner-to-learner interaction'. This is suggestive of an assumption that LLI is inherently preferable to LCI, which is largely unsupported empirically. Nonetheless, it is true that online collaborative learning is appreciated by many ODLs, who report that collaborative

knowledge construction leads to improved understanding (Jones, 2010; Ku, Tseng, & Akarasriworn, 2013). Online groupwork in particular can significantly improve achievement and learning (Kurucay & Inan, 2017) and contribute to learners' sense of community (Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012). These findings may be explained by the concept of interaction treatments and their relative strength (Bernard et al., 2009), which Abrami et al. (2011) investigated in the context of LLI. They emphasise the inadequacy of merely providing opportunities for interaction, and call for ODE instructors and designers to 'facilitate interactions that are more targeted, intentional and engaging' (Abrami et al., 2011, p. 87) achieved through a focus on the purpose and manner of interaction. This notion is further developed by Borokhovski, Tamim, Bernard, Abrami, and Sokolovskaya (2012), who compared research into contextual (opportunities not specifically encouraging interaction) and designed (opportunities intentionally created to promote interaction) collaborative learning opportunities. They established that in order to effect improved achievement outcomes, LLIs must be specifically designed to promote collaborative learning. This was corroborated empirically by Oyarzun, Stefaniak, Bol, and Morrison (2018) who added that designed interactions also impact positively on satisfaction. Taking a more honed approach, it is possible to distinguish between more and less useful types of designed LLI treatments. Shackelford and Maxwell (2012) identified nine types of which introductions, group projects and contributing personal experiences were most predictive of a sense of community. This reflects Soon's (2011) conclusion that learners value the intercultural connections made with peers during collaborative teamwork activities.

However, collaborative online learning is not entirely without obstacles. Certain emotions, attitudes and behaviours communicated through online platforms can result in negative experiences for ODLs (Ferguson, 2010; Phirangee, 2016; Phirangee & Malec, 2017) and may even lead to failure or withdrawal (J. Moore, 2014, p. 282).

Therefore, developing learners' skills in appropriate and useful online communication is essential (Jones, 2010; Soon, 2011; Stephens, 2016). This is particularly important when the purpose of interaction is critical peer review (Samuels-Peretz, 2014), which facilitates deeper learning, or for groupwork where positive personal relationships are vital for successful group tasks (Ku et al., 2013).

Some studies investigating LLI identify categories of contributor or behaviour in online discussions. Two contrasting studies on this topic deserve closer attention. Samuels-Peretz (2014) carried out a content analysis of online discussion forum contributions to identify three types of student: stars, isolates, and ghosts, to indicate the types of responses their contributions prompted. Stars referred to the most popular students, who received positive reactions to their posts, isolates received negative reactions, and ghosts, received no reactions from their peers. Her analysis revealed mostly stars (not always the same individuals), only one instance of an individual being ignored (ghosts) and no-one was criticised (isolates). This indicates a highly supportive and egalitarian type of community. In contrast, one of Phirangee's (2016) seven types of interaction behaviours, lack of meaningful interaction, revealed learners' frustration at the perceived lack of sincerity in the group's tendency to be 'overly nice' (p. 22). A second parallel is Samuels-Peretz's 'ghosts', and Phirangee's 'selective listening', while the former study found only one

instance of a ghost (which was attributed to the individual being the last to post), the selective listening behaviour occurred frequently enough to cause disappointment and discouragement in the latter. The most disliked discussion behaviour, ‘the keener’, in Phirangee’s typology, which was deemed to create an imbalance and hindered other’s learning, is in direct contrast to the overall democracy of Samuels-Peretz’s findings.

These two studies used different methodologies and were driven by different aims (see Table 3.3). Samuels-Peretz was restricted by the three predetermined sociometric concepts in her content analysis which was designed to explore interaction patterns. Phirangee set out to identify negative interaction behaviours, which weakened the sense of community. Nonetheless, the comparison is

	Samuels-Peretz, 2014	Phirangee, 2016
Aims	Explore extent of three interaction types	Identify negative interaction types
Methodology	Content analysis (pre-determined categories) Discussion posts = object of analysis	Grounded theory – categories emerged from analysis Participant perceptions = object of analysis
Sample size	10	6
Sample characteristics	Single cohort All female Mixed ability groups - collaborative discussion task All white On-campus	Disparate cohorts Gender not specified General discussion task Culturally diverse Distance learning

Table 3.3 Comparison of two studies of learner-learner interaction behaviours

worth making as it highlights some important insights regarding online communities:

- empathy exists even in online settings
 - in Phirangee’s selective listening category, participants felt sympathy for their peers who did not receive any responses
 - online forums perhaps highlight this more than the classroom

- culture and gender (socio-cultural background) may impact on interaction (this possibly explains the different attitudes towards perceived ‘niceness’)
- interaction even within a single type, for example, learner-learner is multifaceted and complex, needing careful consideration and management
- roles are not fixed: stars in one task are not necessarily stars in other (this indicates labelling the behaviour: Phirangee’s study, may be more useful than labelling the individual: Samuels-Peretz’s study)

Two important themes emerge from these studies of types of interaction. Firstly, attempts to identify the most important of the three are inconclusive and less than useful, although it does appear that LLI is less impactful than is often assumed.

Secondly, interaction is multifaceted, so this thesis, which aims to comprehend the subtleties of how interaction occurs in a range of contexts and from diverse individual perspectives, will be a worthwhile contribution to understanding in this area. To this end, the following section introduces some additional types of interaction, which I argue begin to transcend the academic, and embrace the wider contexts and spaces inhabited by ODLs.

3.4.2 Beyond Moore’s three types

Along with advances in communications technologies, arose a fourth type of interaction, that between the learner and the technology (LTI). This was originally proposed by Hillman et al. (1994) as learner-interface interaction. Additionally, in line with the aim of this thesis, being to explore interactions beyond the academy, I identify two further types: learner life context interaction (LLCI) and learner-self

interaction (LSI). The following sections discuss each of these additional types of interaction and show how they serve a dual role, both as mediators of Moore's three types, as well as types of interaction in their own right (see figure 3.4).

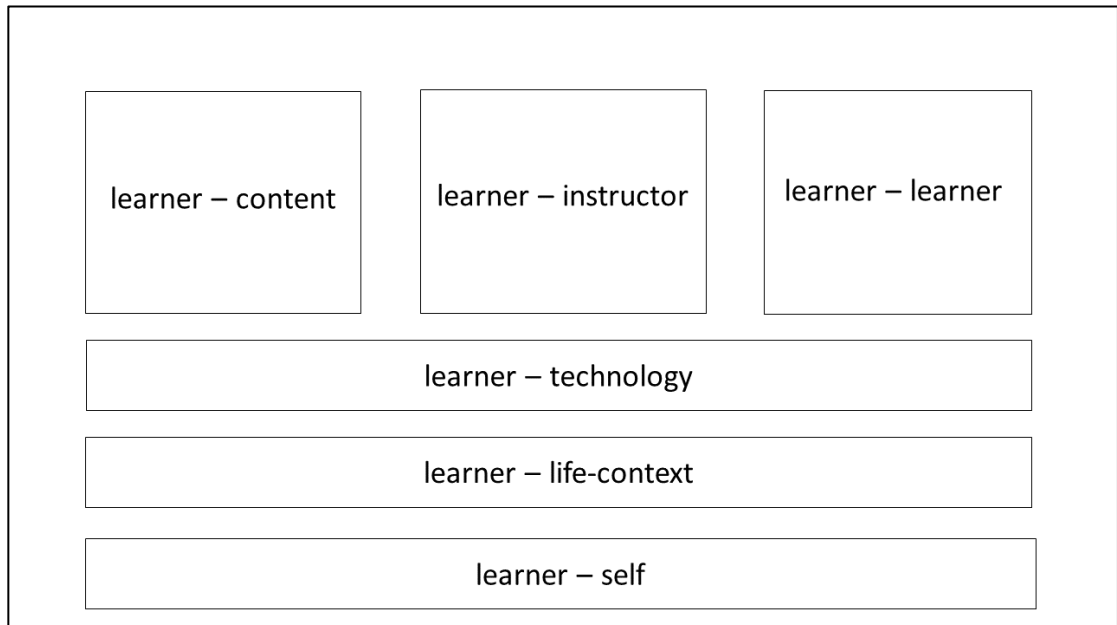


Figure 3.4 Overview of types of interaction

3.4.2.1 Learner-technology interaction

As a consequence of the advance of digital technologies, Hillman et al. (1994) considered the significance of technology as the mediator between all interactions for ODLs. They highlighted the need for pre-sessional instruction to upskill ODLs to pre-empt technological barriers to communication during their learning. This study is premised on the understanding that interaction in DE is necessarily mediated, this aligns with the third defining characteristic of DE noted in chapter 2, and in order for DE interactions to be successful, the mediating technology should ideally be invisible (Haythornthwaite & Andrews, 2011, p. 126). Particularly at the time of writing for Hillman et al., digital skills were not the norm, and even more recently, cannot be assumed, so their recommendations were sensible. It has been suggested that as

digital skills become more commonplace, this type of mediating interaction is no longer relevant (Paul, Swart, Zhang, & MacLeod, 2015). However, the impact of interactions between learner and technology on satisfaction and retention and achievement can have an equally if not more significant influence on learner experience than other types of interaction (Karaoglan Yilmaz, 2017; Weidlich & Bastiaens, 2018). Moreover, I suggest that technology in today's DE is more than a mediator of interactions, technology itself can assist in the construction and synthesis of knowledge through curating, tagging, annotating and collaborating. I therefore consider LTI as a fourth type of interaction.

3.4.2.2 Learner-life context interaction

Explorations of interactions beyond the academic context are rare. One study, which attempts this is Watson's (2013) phenomenological investigation, which identifies five types of LLCIs which postgraduate ODLs engage in. The five types occur within the workplace and are concerned with either academic support from colleagues or opportunities to share and apply their learning. While these findings certainly support the claim that 'teachers surround the learner' (Gibson, 1998, p.122, as cited in Watson, 2013, p. 185), as I argued with regard to TTD, it presupposes a relevant, supportive and competent professional environment. Nonetheless, Watson's work provides a vital starting point for further research into ODLs' life-context interactions.

3.4.2.3 Learner-self interaction

Even rarer than studies into learners' lives beyond academia, are those explicitly investigating reflective interactions occurring between the learner and themselves. This is perhaps due to the fact that this type of interaction is assumed to occur as a matter of course during other types of interaction (Soo & Bonk, 1998). However, such an assumption risks neglecting an important area of interaction, as seen in chapter 2, reflection and associated metacognitive strategies are key ODL competencies, which can and should be taught explicitly. LSI, or reflection, forms the basis of LCI as in the notion of 'internalised conversation' (Lewis, 1975, p.69, as cited in Holmberg, 1995, p. 48). It is this type of interaction which occurs in the period between engaging with content and formulating a response, be that individually through further thinking and note-making, or socially through contributing to a discussion board, or professionally through sharing and applying new knowledge. So, although it is a desirable component of other types of interaction, it is not inevitable or a matter of course, it requires purposeful intent (Rosemary, David, & David, 2013) and as such should be considered as a further type of interaction.

3.4.3 Summary

Generally, the research into interaction in ODE tends to prioritise person-mediated interactions (Xiao, 2017), occurring within the institutional context. Literature which explores interactions beyond the institution or more nuanced aspects of interaction is scarce. The studies reviewed here, generally perceive interaction as a simplistic, linear type of relationship, existing in a closed system, untouched by other aspects of the ODL's life. Given that the underlying philosophy of this thesis is transactionalism, a broader approach to understanding interaction is needed. Therefore, this thesis

adopts a broader understanding of interaction, as a complex, interrelationship of organism-in-environment; it seeks to explore the multi-faceted, reciprocal interactions occurring both within and beyond the academic environment.

3.5 The role of theory in the thesis

Theory has three functions in this thesis. Firstly, Moore's theories of transactional distance (TTD) (1993) and types of interaction (ToI) (1989) were instrumental in the initial conception of the thesis. As I argued in the previous literature chapter, there is a need for a current theory of ODE grounded in the digital context in order to improve our understandings and subsequent design and delivery of ODE programmes. I also emphasised the need for a broader interpretation of interaction and the roles it plays in the experiences of postgraduate ODLs. TTD and ToI enabled me to refine the focus and formulate the research questions which guided the thesis. Secondly, to ensure the interview protocol aligned with the research questions (Castillo-Montoya, 2016), I used TTD and ToI to guide data generation through formulating interview questions (see Appendix A) and when coding the resultant data.

Thirdly, the final element of the theoretical framework, transactionalism, enabled me to advance my analysis and interrogation of the data, to identify the non-dualistic and multi-dimensional 'meaningful episodes' which represented transactions for the participants. The lens of transactionalism also allowed me to reframe and reconceptualise the original two components of my theoretical framework, ToI and TTD, as more faithful explications of my participants' lived experiences.

Throughout this chapter and the previous literature chapter, I have argued that the field of DE lacks an up to date, theoretical underpinning which accounts for today's interactive technologies and the needs of postgraduate ODLs.

The aim of my PhD thesis is to contribute to this gap by applying one of the more comprehensive and enduring theories of DE, that of TTD, to the lived experiences of a group of postgraduate ODLs in order to identify how well the theory explains these learners' experiences of the separation between themselves and the academy. TTD is fundamentally a theory which aligns to the independent learning perspective of DE, I have also argued that it is premised on an instructional and programme design perspective. However, TTD remains one of the few, if not the only, theories specifically addressing the pedagogy of DE. As seen in the literature chapter, the early perspectives on DE, those of independence, control, and access, did not offer any fully developed theories which explained and predicted the pedagogies dealing with the defining characteristic of DE, that of separation. Similarly, more recent theories, which incorporate new technologies, tend towards more general theories of online or e-learning, and while they contribute important understandings to the field, they do not address the unique features of DE, and so the field of ODE remains undertheorised. This thesis, therefore, employs the nearest set of principles we have to a theory of ODE, that of TTD, in a reciprocal way: first as a lens through which to examine the experiences of my ODE participants, but more importantly, as a template, or basis, from which to develop the theory further. Through generation and analysis of data, the thesis suggests an alternative, learner-centred perspective of the theory.

We have seen that the most important element of TTD is dialogue, and more broadly, dialogue, or interaction, has been shown throughout the thesis thus far, to be fundamental to education generally, and DE in particular. Thanks to developments in communications technologies and the interactive web, contemporary DE does not lack opportunities for interaction between learners, instructors, and subject matter. Interaction is conceived as a solution to the isolation of DE, it is a key component of the bridge which spans the psychological separation of the ODL and the academy. Therefore, interaction is arguably as much a defining characteristic of today's ODE as is separation. This becomes pertinent when we adopt a broader conceptualisation of interaction as a complex multi-faceted non-dualist construct which is intricately bound up with all aspects of the learner's life, both within and beyond the academy. In this way, a study of ODLs must have at its core, interaction and, while many studies do seek to explore the nature of interaction, they do so from a reductionist stance, seeking to isolate, measure and maximise effective interaction, while minimising less productive interaction. This thesis adopts a non-reductionist or holistic perspective of interaction, starting from the perspective of Moore's three types of interaction, but seeking to remain open to participants' experiences of all instances of interaction across all spaces not just the academic.

I explore the interactions shared by the participants through the lens of transactionalism. Transactionalism, as a non-dualist understanding of the complexities and reciprocity of interactions experienced by the learner, allows a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the ways in which ODLs experience the

separations and proximities of their DE experience. From my holistic standpoint, the principles of transactionalism promote an opening out of ideas and understandings of interaction rather than a typology of simplistic one-dimensional academy-bound categories. Transactionalism allows, indeed requires, that the learner is conceived of as fully situated not only within their environment, but as part of it. In this way it comprises the underpinning to my thesis in that it rejects the fragmentation, simplification, and dualistic approaches to conceptualising ODLs and ODE, and compels a holistic, unbounded, and nuanced approach.

Having presented the theoretical underpinning to the thesis, in the next chapter, I describe and evaluate my methodological approach to the research design

Chapter 4: Methodology

In this chapter I outline my position as a researcher; I detail how my research paradigm provides the underpinning for the overall design of the study. I then describe and justify my choice of narrative inquiry as a suitable approach for generating the data needed to address the research questions:

RQ 1. How do postgraduate online distance learners experience the separation between themselves and the academy?

RQ 1.1 How do online distance learners describe their interactions within and beyond the study environment?

RQ 1.2 How do interactions within and beyond the study environment impact on the individual learner's experience of the separation between themselves and the academy?

RQ 2. To what extent is the Theory of Transactional Distance a relevant framework through which to conceptualise the online distance learner experience?

I explain how my use of photo-elicitation complements and extends the reach of the narrative inquiry to produce a comprehensive picture of the learners' realities. The section on data generation details sampling procedures, the participants, the interview schedule and the image production remit. I then appraise my approach to data analysis. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the ethical considerations of the study.

4.1 Researcher positioning

Here, I clarify the assumptions underlying my perspective of social reality and how I might attempt to describe and understand it, in other words, my ontological and epistemological stance.

I proceed from the basis of a nominalist or anti-foundationalist ontology which 'stresses the importance of the subjective experience of individuals in the creation of the social world' (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, p. 6). I recognise the variability of socio-cultural contexts, educational backgrounds, economic situations and personality characteristics of learners. Given that the aim of my research is to gain a deeper understanding of ODLs' lived experiences, I first need to acknowledge the immediate problematic nature of this aim. Any individual's lived experience or reality will not only be almost infinitely different from any other individual's, but also will vary for an individual over time and in different physical and psychological contexts. Furthermore, my focus is on the interactions which learners experience, and the fact that these interactions also have the potential to alter the learners' reality and vice versa. This is reflective of a non-dualist ontology and is akin to the Deweyian concept of transactionalism, discussed in the theoretical framework chapter, which asserts the non-neutrality of a stimulus when perceived by an individual (Rosenblatt, 1985). So, the lived experience I attempt to capture, describe and understand can only ever be a snapshot of a single reality at a particular time and place. This reflects the anti-foundationalist belief that "'reality" is socially and discursively 'constructed' by human actors' (Grix, 2004, p. 61) 'in a constant state of revision' (Bryman, 2001 as cited in Grix, 2010, p. 61) as opposed to being a constant, consistent, static and independent truth, as per the foundationalist perspective.

A further important aspect of my anti-foundationalist ontology is the belief that humans have agency over social phenomena, as per the voluntarist perspective on human nature (Cohen et al., 2011). This underpins a belief that we have the power to improve situations. It is my hope that the findings of this study will be of interest to online course designers, instructors and learners in terms of applying the findings to improve ODE course design and become more effective ODE educators and learners.

Given that my aim was to gain insights into learners' lived experiences, deep and rich qualitative data, which illuminate diversities as well as similarities, were necessary to provide a detailed and faithful picture of the learners' lives. I used narrative inquiry supplemented by photo-elicitation to generate this qualitative data.

4.2 Narrative inquiry

It is said that we are 'storied beings', that we make meaning of our lives and experiences through the telling of our stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2).

Stories and the telling of stories, however, is not an individual endeavour; stories are co-constructed between the teller and the audience or listener (Kim, 2016, pp. 98-99; 112) It is my intention to take the part of the audience and help the participants construct their stories, which will shed light on their realities.

Narrative inquiry is a form of qualitative research concerned with stories, which are 'rich in the subjective involvement of the storyteller [and] offer an opportunity for the researcher to gather authentic, rich and 'respectable' data' (Bauman, 1986 as cited in Cohen et al., 2011, p. 455). Stories have the ability to capture 'multiple

perspectives and lived realities' (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 552). Stories present a fuller and more coherent picture and illuminate contextual factors otherwise missed (Bruner, 2004). These characteristics make narratives particularly fitting for my study into the lived experiences of ODLs. The subjectivity and potential bias of narratives are apt in this study of lived experiences, which are subjective, it is these 'internal criteria' (Bruner, 2004, p. 693) that will provide a deeper understanding of the learners' experiences. Moreover, as Bruner claims, 'a life is not "how it was" but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold' (2004, p. 708). Hence, narrative is fundamentally an interpretivist approach.

The driver behind my choice of narrative was the desire to gather and illuminate learners' individual experiences. I was interested in the whole person; I did not want to categorise or identify similarities on which to draw conclusions about who ODLs are and their characteristics. I felt that this had been done previously (for examples see the literature review chapter which details studies of characteristics and behaviours of 'successful' ODLs). While useful to a point, these sorts of approaches tend to homogenise and present only a partial picture of individuals, that of their 'learner-self', while discounting, or marginalising their 'professional-self', 'parent-self', 'triathlete-self', 'disabled-self', for example. In other words, recognising only part of their identities. As an instructor working with ODLs, I have observed that my perceptions of the learners transform dramatically after interacting with them in webinar environments. This is because, I begin to know them as complex and interesting people, rather than two-dimensional, disembodied, generic 'students'.

This understanding has informed a desire to build a picture of those who study online as people, and therefore it was important for me to adopt a ‘human-centred’ approach, which would enable me to learn about people who study online, and the complexity of their experiences as fully as possible (Leonard Webster & Mertova, 2007). With this in mind, I feel Clandinin and Connelly (2000) effectively summarise my rationale, ‘experience happens narratively. Narrative inquiry is a form of narrative experience. Therefore, educational experience should be studied narratively.’ (p. 19). Nonetheless, despite the apparent simplicity of this claim, interpretations and applications of the concept and methodology of narrative and narrative inquiry are numerous and varied (Mishler, 1995; Phoenix, Smith, & Sparkes, 2010). Two issues in particular: defining what a narrative is, and identifying an appropriate method of analysis, were troublesome concepts in my research journey. Therefore, the next section focuses on how these two issues are dealt with in the literature, along with a clarification of my own usage and application of them.

4.2.1 What is narrative?

An everyday understanding of narrative, refers to the literary or mythical story used to maintain and share cultural knowledge (Kim, 2016). Narrative can also be interpreted as a socio-political concept used to represent issues of power in a similar way to the term, discourse (M. Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2013; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998), this is often referred to as grand narrative. In this use of the term, narratives or life histories in a variety of formats, are gathered and used to illuminate social, historical and cultural phenomena (see, for example, Adebani, 2016). A more granular use of the term is that of individual stories or

segments of stories obtained through observation, reflective stories or interviews in order to understand individuals' life experiences (see, for example, Ye & Edwards, 2017; Yuan & Lee, 2016). This latter is the usage which I have adopted in this study. The etymology of narrative is from the Latin, *gnarus*, which means 'knowing' (Phoenix et al., 2010, p. 2). This is a useful starting point and confirms the appropriateness of this in my study of wanting to know about people who study online. However, at this point, it is quite a vague notion. It might be better understood as making known, or, as Phoenix et al. state, 'a way of telling and showing' (2010, p.2), or more fully, as in Hinchman and Hinchman's (1997) much cited definition:

Narratives (stories) in the human sciences should be defined provisionally as discourses with a clear sequential order that connects events in a meaningful way for a definite audience and thus offers insights about the world and/or people's experiences of it

(p.xvi, as cited in Elliot, 2005, p. 3)

Elliot highlights three key elements of this definition: the sequence, the meaningfulness and the audience (2005, p. 4), however, the fourth element of offering insights would also appear to be important. The stories shared by the participants in my study, often, but not always, recount a sequence of events, they are often reflections on recent or ongoing situations, however, they all offer insights into how they experience and make sense of the interactions, or transactions they are part of. A similar emphasis on sequencing and impact, or outcome is found in Reissman and Speedy's definition:

What distinguishes narrative from other forms of discourse? One answer is sequence and consequence: Events are selected, organised, connected, and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience

(2007, p.430 as cited in Phoenix et al., 2010, p. 2)

Squire (2013, p. 3), writing from an experience-centred perspective, adds that narratives should display transformation or change. And Bruner (1991) goes further to describe ten features of narrative, again, the first on the list is sequence. This sequential, or diachronic element, is also a feature of lived experience (van Manen, 2016), the object of my study. The data in my study are a combination of synchronic (reflections on a current situation) and diachronic (descriptions of events and their impact) (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 12). Although narrative inquiry is primarily concerned with diachronic data, by restricting my focus to this type, would be to overlook some rich and insightful synchronic data in the form of reflections shared by the participants on their ongoing experiences of the interactions they are engaged in. As W. Patterson (2013) explains in her discussion of the limitations of Labov's approach:

to define narrative in terms of the recounting of specific past time events would be to miss the point that what matters to some narrators, the 'point' of their narrative, is to share their experiences with others, not to impart information about some historical event. (p.12)

She proposes her own definition of narrative earlier in her PhD Thesis:

texts which bring stories of personal experience into being by means of the first person oral narration of past, present, future or imaginary experience. (Patterson, 2000, p.128)

In a similar way, I propose my own understanding and use of the term 'narrative' in this study, to be a reflective evaluation of a past event or current situation detailing or arising from a transformative interaction.

Often, story is used as a synonym for narrative, although Kim (2016, pp. 8-9) makes the hierarchical distinction between stories, which are more complete, structured entities whereas narratives are more partial sequences of events. Conversely, Frank (1995, as cited in Holloway & Freshwater, 2007, p. 5) states the opposite, that narratives are composed of stories. I use narrative in the micro sense of the term; the narratives forming the basis of my study are segments or episodes extracted from my participants' accounts of their lived experience. While certain of these may constitute stories in that they have a beginning, middle and end and are composed of sequences of related events, they do not all have this story structure, therefore I use the term narratives more generally to denote these "partial" description[s] of lived experience' (Kim, 2016, p. 9).

4.2.2 Narrative analysis

Most narrative scholars offer models, frameworks and typologies of approaches to analysis. In this section I provide an overview of some of these and clarify my own understanding and application (see Table 4.1).

Element	Author	Details	My approach
definition: narrative as	Connelly and Clandinin (1990)	a way to make meaning of our lives	
	Kim (2016)	literary/mythical story	
	M. Andrews et al. (2013)	socio-political concept (grand narrative)	
	Ye and Edwards (2017)	individual stories/segments of stories	X
	Labov (2010)	a most reportable event	X
distinguishing characteristics	Phoenix et al. (2010)	a way of showing & telling	X
	Elliot (2005)	sequenced discourses offering meaningful insights	
	Reissman and Speedy (2007)	sequence & consequence	
	Squire (2013)	display transformation or change	
	Kim (2016)	co-constructed between the teller and the listener	X
hierarchy	Kim (2016)	stories consist of narratives	X
	Frank (1995)	narratives consist of stories	
role of researcher	Polkinghorne (1995)	story analyst / analysis of narratives	
	Phoenix et al. (2010)	storyteller / narrative analysis	X
analysis techniques	Phoenix et al. (2010)	structural	
		performative	X
	Lieblich et al. (1998)	holistic	
		categorical	X
		content	
	Holloway and Freshwater (2007)	form	X
		genre	
		plot	X
Connelly and Clandinin (1990)	broadening		
	burrowing	X	
Kim (2016)	storying & restorying	X	

Table 4.1 Overview of narrative methodology

For Phoenix et al. (2010), approaches to working with narratives relate to the role of the researcher, who may be either a story analyst or a storyteller. The storyteller does not actually analyse narratives as it is believed the analysis is embedded within the telling and so the storyteller's work is to enact, perform, or show the story, often using artistic techniques. The story analyst, on the other hand, views stories as data upon which to perform analysis. These two approaches align with Polkinghorne's

(1995) distinction between narrative analysis, creating stories, and analysis of narratives, stories as data to be analysed. Phoenix et al., then go on to describe two types of techniques available to the story analyst. Structural analysis, which ‘focuses on the way in which a story is put together’ (Holloway & Freshwater, 2007, p.85, as cited in Phoenix et al., 2010, p. 5), or the narrative type; and performative analysis focussing on ‘how the narrative is communicated’ (Holloway & Freshwater, 2007, p.86, as cited in Phoenix et al., 2010, p. 6). Structural analysis is that approach most often associated with William Labov, who, together with Joshua Waletzky, developed a specific analytical framework with which to deconstruct narratives into six constituent units: abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, result, and coda (Labov & Waletzky, 1997). However, theirs was a purely sociolinguistic method concerned with the isolating the elements of narrative in order to identify and evaluate ways of telling personal stories (Johnstone, 2016; W. Patterson, 2013), which is not my intention in this study. Furthermore, it is prescriptive in its understanding of what constitutes a narrative, and the six part structure does not easily fit all accounts of personal experience (Polanyi, 1985 as cited in W. Patterson, 2013, p. 13).

Lieblich et al. (1998) present a matrix of four methods of analysis comprising two intersecting continuums: holistic - categorical and content - form. The holistic - categorical continuum denotes the unit of analysis with the former being the whole life story and the latter, smaller sections. The content - form continuum refers to the focus of analysis, with the former relating to plot and events, while the latter is more concerned with linguistic features. There are therefore, four possible combinations

within this model, although the authors emphasise these represent ends of a spectrum with many points between from which to approach narrative analysis. A further potential confusion must be noted here, however, as Holloway and Freshwater (2007, p. 85) citing Elliot (2005) and Gergen and Gergen (1987) present a different interpretation of holistic versus categorical analysis, which relates more to the genre and plot, respectively. A similar distinction to Lieblich et al.'s holistic - categorical, is Connelly and Clandinin's (1990, as cited in Leonard Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 87) 'broadening', the wider contextual framework, and 'burrowing', the details of the event. Kim (2016, p. 207) adds a third dimension, that of storying and restorying, which is more akin to the earlier storyteller approach and Polkinghorne's (1995) narrative analysis.

My own approach to analysis sits within the categorical - form quadrant of Lieblich et al.'s matrix as shown in Figure 4.1 below. However, it is not wholly aligned to either of these aspects, as I needed to view the narrative of each participant in its entirety in order to identify the most meaningful episodes and it was also clearly necessary, to discuss the overall plot, characters and events, that is, content, before I was able to focus in on the language used, or, form. Hence, I locate my project towards the middle of the quadrant.

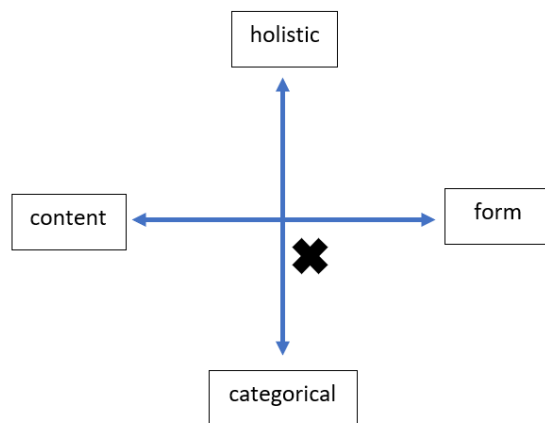


Figure 4.1 Positioning of my mode of analysis in relation to Leiblich et al,'s 1998 model.

4.2.3 Borrowings from other traditions

There are several parallels to the phenomenological tradition in my research design. Firstly, the premise that ‘while people are not always reliable informants about what *actually happened*, they are reliable – indeed, authoritative – informants about their *experience* of what happened’ (Paley, 2014, p. 1521). My study does not seek to ascertain the ultimate reality of being an ODL, I do not accept the existence of one, single reality, an ‘assumption of one single reality ... is epistemologically unacceptable from a qualitative perspective’ (Tobin & Begley, 2004. p.393 as cited in Paley, 2014, p. 1521). Rather, I seek to present a collection of realities, all of which are valid, accurate, and representative of the lived experience of each learner, according to their own interpretation and retelling. This position reflects van Manen’s (2016) assertion that ‘experiential accounts, or lived-experience descriptions . . . are never identical to the lived experience itself’ (p.54). My aim is to use these ‘lived-experience descriptions’ as a basis for further interpretation and analysis (van Manen, 2016, p. 55).

However, this is where the similarity between my methodology and phenomenology ends. The ultimate purpose of my study is to better understand ‘the subjective experiences of our so-called subjects or informants, for the sake of being able to report on how something is seen from their particular view, perspective, or vantage point (van Manen, 2016, p. 62), whereas ‘the deeper goal . . . of phenomenological research, remains oriented to asking the question of what is the nature of this phenomenon . . . as an essentially human experience’ (van Manen, 2016, p. 62). My belief is that research should have some practical application and be of use to practitioners; for an online practitioner, understanding the learning process from a learner perspective, albeit subjective and divergent, is of more practical benefit than an abstraction of the underlying essence of the phenomenon.

So, while I use elements of phenomenology: the conversational interview, the lived-experience descriptions as data, the embracing of the unreliability of participants, my focus remains on the experiences of ODLs, not the essence, or phenomenon, of ODE. Hence my methodology is closer to narrative inquiry. I recognise that this approach to research is open to criticism by methodological purists, however, I wish to remain true to my original research questions and pursue answers to these through the most appropriate qualitative methods, as van Manen warns, ‘one needs to guard against the temptation to let method rule the question, rather than the research question determining what kind of method is most appropriate for its immanent direction’ (2016, p. 66).

My study is not ethnographic in that I do not have 'direct and sustained contact' (O'Reilly, 2011) with the participants. The participants in my study are geographically dispersed and, while they may be said to represent the culture of ODLs, they are not a physically unified community. However, it is my intention to produce rich accounts of their experiences, as such, my study has elements of ethnography.

4.3 Photo-elicitation

The use of photographs in ethnographic and anthropological research is long-established. The use of photographic data produced by participants can produce a richer account than verbal interview data alone (Collier, 1957; Margolis & Pauwels, 2011). This was a particularly valuable tool for data generation due to the physical distance between myself as researcher and the research participants. An additional benefit of using photographs as the focus for an interview is that they have the potential to create a more naturalistic setting and relaxed encounter than in a direct interview situation (Collier, 1957). This may also counter the unfamiliar, often stilted nature of online dialogues (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014, pp. 610-611) and facilitate rapport between researcher and participant (Collier, 1957, p. 857). It is also claimed that 'a photograph is a restatement of reality; it presents life around us in new, objective, and arresting dimensions, and can stimulate the informant to discuss the world about him [*sic*] as if observing it for the first time' (Collier, 1957, p. 859). In this way, a photograph can generate unexpected data which would otherwise be absent from a verbal interview alone (Stanczak, 2007). This technique is similar to Shearer et al.'s (2020) Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis research design. Their study used a technique known as ZMET (Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation) which analyses how

participants discuss images in order to 'obtain deep thoughts and emotions' (Shearer et al., 2020, p. 40).

There is a range of techniques for obtaining photographic data; Mannay (2016) describes three: found materials, researcher initiated and participatory. Traditional 'researcher initiated' approaches to using photographs in research have been criticised for perpetuating an imperialistic power imbalance subject to the researcher bias and misconceptions (Mannay, 2016). In efforts to counter this and redress the power balance, 'participatory productions', which potentially result in a more democratic research process *with* rather than *on* participants (Mannay, 2016), have been adopted. It is this approach I used in my study, more specifically I used a method known as 'auto-driven' in its narrower sense, in that the participant selects and produces images according to a loose remit from the researcher (Stanczak, 2007, p. 12). I broadened the remit further to include images more generally, for example screenshots, or even drawings produced by the participants as I wanted to maximise the amount of choice and individual control over this element of data generation. As with narrative methods, and in line with my constructionist ontology, this approach reflects a collaborative participatory methodology. Images selected and shared by the participants were inherently subjective in terms of individual choices of what to photograph, and the interpretation of the images during interviews were also subjective and co-constructed between myself and the participant (Stanczak, 2007).

It is important to note that the images produced and shared by participants were intended purely as prompts for discussion during interview, they were never intended as data sources in themselves to be analysed.

4.4 Data generation

In line with the 'social situatedness' (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 409) of my study, I conducted three individual semi-structured interviews with each participant as the basis for data generation. I use the term 'data generation' rather than 'data collection' as it is a more accurate description of the fact that the data in this study, did not and would not exist independently of the research study; it was co-produced between myself and the participants as a direct consequence of my investigation.

The following distinction effectively describes my positioning here which views data as:

a product of the interaction between the researchers and the data source during fieldwork. The term generation is intended to encapsulate the variety of ways in which the researcher, social world, and data interact in qualitative inquiry. Data are not considered to be "out there" just waiting to be collected; rather, data are produced from their sources using qualitative research methods. (Garnham, 2008, p. 193)

Likewise, my conception of interviews as a means to co-produce meaning, reflects that of Kvale's observation 'an *inter-view*, an interchange of views' (1996, p.11 as cited in Cohen et al., 2011, p. 409) during a 'social encounter' (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 410). In this way, this method of data generation, could be described more generically as discussion or conversation rather than interviews. Although these

'conversations' were necessarily contrived, as far as possible, I wanted to minimise the researcher-participant roles in favour of a more relaxed, natural encounter. For this reason, although I had prepared a list of discussion points and questions, I aimed for these to act as 'openings' or 'pathways', to give participants free expression and allow me to follow their lead (L. M. Brown & Gilligan, 1993, p. 19). In this way, I hoped to avoid a clinical question-answer scenario and reduce associated power structures.

4.4.1 Sampling

Participants were postgraduate part-time ODLs from the UK and beyond currently studying a wholly online programme recruited from a range of higher education institutions within the UK. My sampling technique can be described as purposive, in that I targeted a specific group of individuals on the basis of them having the characteristics I wanted to study (Bryman, 2016). The sample then is by no means representative, but the nature of my study, does not seek to be representative. I did not seek to generalise conclusions based on trends and patterns, I sought to understand individuals and their lived experiences in depth.

I sent calls for participants via ODE instructors, whom I knew personally as well as identifying them through institutional websites, requesting they share the call with their learners. I appealed to a wider network of higher education ODE practitioners via ODE courses listed on UKCourseFinder (www.ukcoursefinder.com) and several Jiscmail lists of which I am a member of including:

- Learning Development in Higher Education Network (LDHEN)
- Association of Learning Technology (ALT)

- Teaching Online
- Online Learning
- Elearning Research
- Moodle-HE
- LearningDesign
- Mobile-Learning
- Evaluation of online learning

In this way I hoped to access a range of programmes, disciplines, institutions and learners. I aimed to recruit approximately ten participants, although I received a positive response, and 12 participants completed the study. A sample of this size is appropriate for in-depth qualitative studies aiming to generate ‘thick descriptions’ (Geertz, 1973 as cited in Cohen et al., 2011, p. 162) such as mine. Moreover, interviewing each participant three times in a loosely structured way, produced an abundance of rich data. The 36 interviews, or conversations, resulted in almost 24 hours of audio-visual data plus a small amount of additional textual data produced when the technology failed, which was more than sufficient for the detailed, rich analyses I conducted. A higher number of participants would have been logistically challenging and would have resulted in an unnecessary and unmanageable amount of data. Table 4.2 below provides an overview of the participants.

Pseudonym	Age	Location	Professional context	Industry	Qualification	Discipline	Institution
Chetna	29	Indian Ocean	local government	government	MA	Public Policy	Russell group
Colette	44	Europe	HE lecturer	HE	MA	Education	distance
Fred	58	Europe	Educational technologist	HE	MSc	Education	Russell group

Chapter 4: Methodology

Lucy	30	Europe	Editor (learning technology)	HE	MA	Education	Russell group
Shona	64	Europe	Retired	Care	MA	Education	distance
Annie	48	Europe	Freelance lecturer; nurse	HE/Health	MA	Education	distance
Abigail	50	Europe	Lead educator (healthcare simulation)	Care industry	MA	Education	distance
Roseanne	47	Europe/Nor th America	researcher	Health	MSc	Clinical trials	Russell group
Marion	39	North America	Surgeon	Health	MSc	Clinical trials	Russell group
Sasha	27	Europe	Pharmacist	Health	MSc	Clinical trials	Russell group
Safi	35	Africa	Clinical manager	Health	MSc	Clinical trials	Russell group
Tamac	39	Africa	Trials monitor	Health	MSc	Clinical trials	Russell group

Table 4.2 Research participants

Apart from Chetna studying public policy, the participants fell into two categories according to their programme of study: those studying education and those studying a clinical programme; in fact, the latter were all from one programme. This split was not intentional, it was purely a result of which programme leaders and learning communities shared the call for participants. Initially, I had thought this might prove an interesting basis for comparison, however following data collection and analysis, each cohort did not demonstrate any notable internal similarities or differences from the other. Furthermore, this would not account for Chetna, studying a different programme. As Table 4.2 shows, the participants were varied in terms of age, educational background, geographical location and type of institution. There are some similarities in professional context, due to the two dominant cohorts. It is notable that all the participants were affiliated to either a Russell Group or a distance education institution. This was not planned; it relates to the earlier

explanation regarding which programme leaders and students shared the invitation to participate. 5 of the 12 participants were on the same programme of study, which was delivered by a Russell group institution; 6 of the remaining 7, were studying an education-related programme at either a Russell group or a distance institution (or both in Annie's case). It is perhaps to be expected that a significant proportion of the sample of ODLs are affiliated to a distance institution. Similarly, campus-based universities offering distance education opportunities are often those elite institutions with international reputation and the resources needed to develop such programmes; indeed, the top ten UK Universities for distance learning are all members of the Russell group (Studyportals, 2021). Due to this unanticipated situation regarding the affiliation of the participants, during analysis, I paid particular attention to discern any patterns reflecting institutional differences or similarities. However, ultimately, no such patterns emerged and so I conclude that this did not impact on the analysis or interpretation of the findings.

4.4.2 Interviews

All interviews were conducted via a virtual meeting platform, usually Skype, and recorded. The audio was then extracted and transcribed. The first interview served to establish rapport, introduce the aims and provide some background information about the study and to obtain background and contextual data about the participant and their current learning situation including the motivations, aspirations, challenges and behavioural and emotional experiences of ODE. This interview also sought to establish the types of interaction and elements of transactional distance experienced by the participants. The interview protocol (Appendix A) included questions and

prompts which encouraged participants to consider the people, objects and environment they interacted with during their learning journey. During this phase, I introduced and explained the photo-elicitation method in which I invited participants to produce and share with me some photographs, images or screenshots illustrating something about their experience as an ODL. The remit for sharing images representing participants' experiences (Appendix B) was purposely vague in order to elicit deeper personal and context-sensitive reflections and observations about the diverse spheres of influence around them. In this way, the data comprised reflective discourse on a variety of interaction types.

The second interview was based around the images which participants had uploaded to a shared Box folder, as well as some checking and clarifying required following preliminary analysis of the initial interview. During the phase two interviews, I invited the participant to describe and interpret their images as well as offering my own interpretations. Prior to the third interview, I conducted further analysis on the data produced thus far using a method, which is discussed in more detail in the analysis section. The third interview comprised discussion of the shared analysis to date, filling in any missing demographic data, asking follow-up questions arising from the analysis and reflections on reasons for participating in the study as well as the impact of the study on participants. The data generation process is represented visually in Figure 4.2 below.

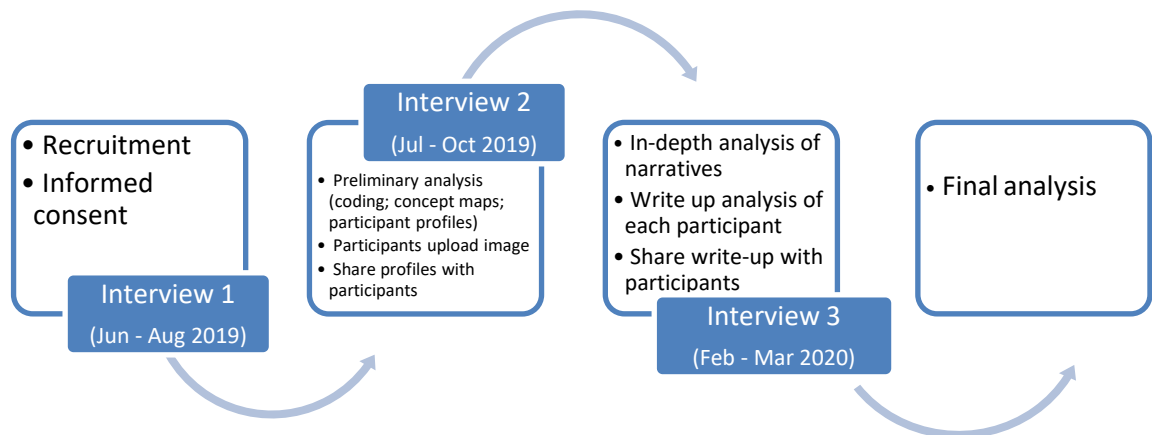


Figure 4.2 Data generation process

The process clearly entailed a ‘merging’ of data generation and analysis (Gibbs, 2007, p.3 as cited in Cohen et al., 2011, p. 537), which again is quite typical of the interpretivist epistemology I adopted. I found this iterative process invaluable for three reasons. Firstly, having three interviews planned from the outset facilitated a more relaxed approach to the discussions with participants and I was able to allow these to flow freely and naturally rather than feeling constrained by the necessity to cover everything in a single conversation. It also seemed more appropriate to ask personal demographic questions such as age and previous education, in the second interviews, after rapport had been established. In this way, I was able to follow the participants’ lead, allowing them to expand on, exemplify and relate anecdotes to illustrate their experiences. I feel this resulted in thicker descriptive narratives than a strict interview protocol.

Secondly, as a doctoral student, with minimal research experience, I found it difficult to fully anticipate the necessary questions to ask; by working on the data from the

first round of interviews, I was able to refine my focus, understand my theoretical framework, adjust my technique in readiness for the second and third round of interviews. This inter-interview analysis highlighted comments from participants I had not probed further at the time, but which needed further clarification, which I was able to do in subsequent interviews. The analysis and interpretation caused me to think more deeply about the data, which in turn, led to further questions. I realised that some of my questions in the first interviews did not necessarily lead to experiential responses in the form of narratives, therefore in the second interviews I had prepared questions such as 'Tell me about a time when ...' in order to elicit fuller 'stories'.

Thirdly, the time lag in-between the three rounds of interviews, allowed the participants time for reflection, causing them to occasionally expand on their previous responses after having had more time to consider their experiences in the light of my questions. This prolonged time period, had the additional effect of meeting the participants at different points in their studies and thus observing changes occurring over time.

4.4.3 Challenges and opportunities of remote interviewing

Clearly, the nature of this study of ODLs located in three continents, face-to-face interviewing was never an option and therefore tele-conferencing was necessary. As a result of my experience as an online tutor, I am comfortable using a range of tools and was open to using a variety of platforms according to the preference of the participant. However, Microsoft's Skype is undeniably universally recognised and freely accessible (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Many people have ready access to this

through a personal, work or student account. Furthermore, as online tutor and my participants being ODLs, we had a degree of comfort and familiarity operating in an online environment. In addition to being familiar and accessible to participants, I particularly wanted to use an audio-visual tool, rather than a single mode tool such as the telephone, in order to maximise the social connection between myself and participants. The facility for recording, downloading and saving the interviews for later transcription and analysis was also necessary. I outline here some of the challenges as well as one or two unanticipated benefits of interviewing via Skype.

4.4.3.1 Connectivity

Undoubtedly, variable and unreliable connectivity presented the most significant obstacle to establishing a relaxed, natural interview atmosphere. An early interview, in fact the second interview I conducted, proved particularly frustrating; the following is an extract from my research journal:

The interview with Chetna was awful, I only managed to record half of it before her phone cut off (this was after Skype wouldn't work so we tried WhatsApp). So then we tried Google Meet, but I wasn't able to record it so had to make notes, so don't feel like it went well at all because I was flustered, it was disjointed, I wasn't able to relax and follow up, etc. as I was making notes, plus trying to think of how to record it, so felt like I missed a lot of info plus opportunities for probing more deeply.

This journal entry reflects a particularly low point which came early in the data collection phase and had a significant impact on my confidence in being able to

conduct future interviews successfully. This example offers a useful illustration of the visibility of technology which in this case was ‘glaringly obvious’ (Haythornthwaite & Andrews, 2011, p. 126) and detracted significantly from the quality and rapport desirable in semi-structured qualitative interviews (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 422).

Fortunately, this was the worst example, although some subsequent interviews were also marred by poor connectivity, none were as bad as this. Further connectivity problems, meant that during one interview, the participant was not able to hear my audio, fortunately, due to the multi-modal nature of Skype, I was able to type my questions into the chat and the participant responded verbally; I then added the text-based questions to the transcript; this mirrors the experience of Deakin and Wakefield (2014). I did not feel that this impacted or detracted from the quality of the interview (perhaps because we began without any audio problems, and were therefore able to establish a rapport), however it did rely on my knowledge of possibilities and being able to adapt in the moment to such technical ‘hitches’ and may not have been as seamless with an interviewer less familiar with online communication.

4.4.3.2 Logistics

Finding a mutually convenient time for interviews with participants in different time zones and with access to the necessary technology, meant that several interviews were conducted at the participant’s place of work and even in their work uniform. As Deakin and Wakefield (2014) found, this led to further obstacles and distractions such as interruptions from work colleagues. Although this only happened in one interview, it resulted in us having to abandon and reschedule, which would have

been less likely in a face-to-face interview. A further disadvantage of interviewing people in their workplace is that the work environment may restrict participants' freedom, particularly if the location is not private. It may also result in a lack of complete commitment and focus if the participant feels s/he has work to be getting on with. In these scenarios, the interview may feel like an interruption or intrusion into the work environment and may curtail responses or even render responses in a more business-like framing. Having said this, several of my participants are home-workers, so although they were in a home environment, there may have potentially been work distractions. This is in contrast to claims regarding the logistical benefits of using Skype described by Lo Iacono, Symonds, and Brown (2016), although it cannot be denied that arranging Skype interviews entails fewer logistical barriers than conventional interviews requiring a physical venue.

4.4.3.3 Opportunities

In addition to the obvious convenience, minimal costs and opportunities to interview a wide range of international participants, using Skype brought two specific enhancements to the interviews. Firstly, Shona, who had not shared any images for the photo-elicitation element for our second interview, elected instead to use her webcam to show me around her flat and demonstrate her assistive technologies. These constitute an essential and integral part of her reality and this virtual guided tour of her home, provided an enhanced and more immediate source of visual data on which to base further reflective commentary. Secondly, in the second phase of interviewing, one of Colette's cats came into shot next to her on the sofa; this offered an amusing episode and prompted me to move my camera to show my own

cat in the background. I felt this instant of sharing something of our respective personal environments facilitated a more relaxed social encounter.

4.5 Analysis

Data analysis underwent several iterations beginning early during data generation and continuing throughout. Here I outline how my approach to analysis changed from coding to a more holistic technique known as the Listening Guide.

4.5.1 Coding

Following the initial round of interviews, I engaged in a period of becoming familiar and intimate with the data through listening to check accuracy of and anonymise transcripts. I also actively listened to each interview several times in order to produce concept maps, which visually represented the participants' personally significant learning environments (C. Patterson et al., 2017) and helped me to identify descriptive and interpretive codes. I used Nvivo software to help manage the coding and analysis process. Further codes were informed by the research questions and theoretical framework. I then coded the interview transcripts using a 'broadbrush' approach followed by a more reflective reviewing of the codes which resulted in a more refined set of codes more aligned to my research questions (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013, p. 71). These two initial phases of coding involved significant reflective work resulting in analytic memos, which constantly informed, reformed, questioned and illuminated my analysis as well as the theoretical framework and literature. This work also highlighted areas requiring clarification and further questioning in the second round of interviews.

4.5.1.1 Coding queries

A particular benefit to this initial coding process was that it prompted me to question and think more deeply about the codes I had originally identified and the associated concepts. One significant query that arose related to interaction and dialogue; my initial codes included both: interaction consisted of subcategories listing all the types of interaction I identified in the theoretical framework section, while dialogue existed as a sub-category of TD. Here is an extract from my coding memo reflecting the thinking around this:

Maybe the interaction codes all should come under the 'dialogue' of 'TD'? But Moore's dialogue only referred to 'learner-instructor' - he actually calls it 'instructional dialogue'; in his 1993 writing, he makes a distinction between dialogue and interaction, he assigns positive, constructive qualities particularly to dialogue (p.24). So, if dialogue is a positive form of interaction, then it should be a sub-category of interaction, whereas I'm sure I've seen other people write about it as if the dialogue element of TD can be discussed in terms of the 3 types of interaction, so this is wrong. So, I need to remove the sub-categories of 'dialogue' node, then. Chen (2001) has four factors measuring transactional distance - they are basically Moore's 3 types of interaction plus learner-interface. So, this is wrong, Moore didn't talk about the 3 types of interaction in terms of transactional distance. Also, Zhang's (2003) scale refers to TD between student & teacher/content/student - so again, they're mixing up 3 types of interaction and the dialogue element of TD.

What is significant about this process of reflection and questioning, is that it led me to identify an important alternative interpretation of Moore's work, that of conflating three ToI and TD. This prompted me to re-examine both of Moore's theories, more closely in order to understand whether I had in fact been 'missing something' and contributed to a deeper critique of TTD and ultimately the second research question. It is quite possible that this reassessment would not have occurred without the coding process and associated queries. Further reflections on the evolving coding structure occurred and were noted in the analytic memos tool; these provide insights into my thought processes during this period.

During the later stages of data analysis, having noted the disconnect and lack of alignment between the theories of interaction and TD, I was prompted to explore the idea of transactionalism in more depth. Transactionalism functioned as an overarching theory and allowed me to reinterpret the data from a more holistic perspective.

4.5.2 Creating profiles

Towards the end of this initial phase of analysis, I felt I had become familiar with each participant and their situation. In order to consolidate this and provide an opportunity for co-construction with participants, I produced brief profiles of each participant. These varied in length from around 300 to 800 words. I found these profiles a useful way to summarise and focus on the key characteristics of each participant's experience (Bazeley, 2013, p. 107), which then enabled me to identify the diverse characters, events and plots of each narrative. I shared the profiles with participants prior to the second interviews and invited them to offer feedback

regarding the accuracy, representativeness and completeness of their experiences. Generally, the participants were pleased with the profiles and had little to add or correct. Corrections were minor, for example, Tamac noted her employer was an NGO rather than a charity as I had stated, and Annie clarified my misinterpretation regarding the lack of structure in the correspondence course, which she said was structured but lacked deadlines.

4.5.3 Unit of analysis

Having established that my interpretation of narrative is segments or episodes within the larger story, I will now detail how I identified units of analysis. Labov asserts that narratives are usually based on a 'most reportable event' (Labov, 2010, p. 7). Webster and Mertova (2007) use the term 'critical events' as units of analysis, these are described as having a life-changing impact. Due to my focus on a particular element of their lives, my participants' stories were not full life histories and did not centre around particular 'critical events'; my focus was on interactions experienced by the participants, or transactions. However, I found Webster and Mertova's narrower focus on particular episodes a useful starting point for the identification of what I termed 'meaningful episodes'. These are what ultimately provided the units of analysis in this study.

By the end of the second round of interviews, having relistened, transcribed, coded transcripts and written profiles, I had a clear idea of the most prominent transactions for each participant. Some articulated particularly meaningful experiences, which formed the central idea throughout their whole story. An example of this is Sasha, whose whole story across the three interviews and through his selection and

interpretation of images, was that of transformation from feeling overwhelmed and not coping to becoming empowered and finding joy in his experience having taken ownership and control of his learning. Another example is Fred, whose whole experience is characterised by a search for critical and challenging dialogue.

However, these ‘holistic’ narratives were the minority, most participants described several transactions, which collectively comprised their ODE experience. I identified the transactions for each participant (see Table 4.3) and then conducted in-depth analysis of each one.

Narrative	Participant	Transaction
1	Marion	colleagues: ‘nobody really cares’
2	Marion	groupwork: ‘go-getters’; ‘tied up doing other things’
3	Colette	peer interactions: ‘we sorted out each other’s misconceptions’
4	Colette	contributing to forums: ‘I’m just having a chat’
5	Shona	whole cohort forum: ‘it wasn’t logical’
6	Shona	groupwork: ‘the timelines is interesting’
7	Shona	approach to study: ‘I study on a challenge basis’
8	Shona	occupying the mind: ‘to make my mind think’
9	Annie	groupwork: ‘it gets a bit frictionous at times’
10	Annie	group dynamics: ‘the control freak’
11	Annie	approach to study: ‘deadlines are important’
12	Annie	background: ‘I’m quite self-directed’
13	Chetna	international perspectives: ‘
14	Lucy	professional context: ‘I was the go-to person’
15	Lucy	discussion forums: ‘it’s more strategic than anything’
16	Fred	Evernote: ‘my life is in Evernote’
17	Fred	discussion forums: ‘I just want to talk to people about this stuff’
18	Sasha	unprepared: ‘I’m mostly alone with this study’
19	Sasha	transformation: ‘it’s not a problem for me anymore’
20	Abigail	study buddies ‘the troublemaker cohort’
21	Abigail	two tutors
22	Tamac	inactive forums: ‘I was just waiting for other students to start posting’
23	Tamac	studying ‘alone’
24	Roseanne	‘it’s no sacrifice’
25	Roseanne	‘rabbit holes’
26	Safi	‘understanding correctly’
27	Safi	applied learning
28	Chetna	‘not everything can be discussed’
29	Chetna	impact of studying

Table 4.3 Overview of transactions selected for analysis

4.5.4 The Listening Guide

As already stated, my approach to analysis was towards the categorical and form ends of Lieblich et al.'s (1998) model, yet with a focus on the whole person. Partway through the second round of interviews when coding transcripts, I observed that the coding process was beginning to have the effect of fragmenting the narratives and taking me away from the individuals and their stories. Consequently, I sought a more holistic form of analysis; the Listening Guide (L. M. Brown, 1998; L. M. Brown & Gilligan, 1992) provided such a method. The Listening Guide is a voice-centred relational method (L. M. Brown & Gilligan, 1992) and borrows concepts from the world of music to illuminate the different voices or 'movements' which reveal insights into how people position themselves in relation to others. In other words, it is 'a systematic method for interpreting . . . and listening to the complexities of voice in relationship' (L. M. Brown & Gilligan, 1992, p. 20). The authors of the Listening Guide are psychologists and needed a method of analysis which would provide 'a pathway into relationship rather than a fixed framework for interpretation' (L. M. Brown & Gilligan, 1992, p. 22); their intentions were to identify factors such as repression and create change through their research. Clearly, this was not my intention in this study, I did not wish to, nor am I qualified to, perform such deep psychological analysis and interpretation of my participants' emotional state. However, what the Listening Guide offered me was a structure and set of questions with which to progress my analysis. These questions form a series of steps which require at least four separate listenings and/or readings of transcripts each time with a different focus. Figure 4.3 is an example of this staged analytic process.

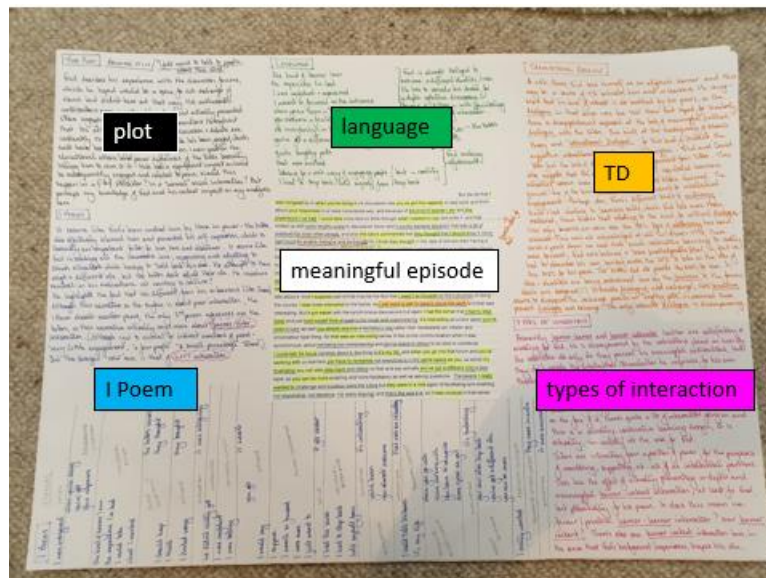


Figure 4.3 Example of analysis using the Listening Guide

Step one entails listening for plot; in this step the main events, characters and context are outlined as well as the listener's responses to these. In this way, not only is the narrative highlighted but also the subjective influence of the listener. Step 2 requires the construction of I Poems. This entails highlighting all the subject-verb phrases and reveals the attitude of the speaker and their positioning of themselves in relation to other characters and objects. Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, and Bertsch (2006) specify only the selection of first person 'I', whereas Doucet and Mauthner (2008) hint at including other pronouns to highlight shifts in perspective. I found that by highlighting all subjects (in the grammatical sense) of verb phrases, I was able to identify not only shifts in perspective, but also subtleties of attitude, alliances and transformations occurring during a narrative. During this step, I also identified stanzas, or 'idea units' (Gee, 1985, p. 14) of the I Poems. This was particularly effective in isolating the sequences and transformations of the stories, for example, Annie's narrative 14 moves through several stanzas from conflict to resolution; in

Colette's narrative 4, the early stanza's use first person I, indicating the lack of community, but move towards more 'we' once community has been established. Steps 3, 4 and beyond are more focused on the research questions of the study and in my analysis these steps consisted in reviewing each narrative through my theoretical lenses: TTD and Tol. Finally, in a fifth step, I highlighted significant vocabulary and linguistic features in the sense of Gee's (2014) linguistic, or small d/discourse.

4.6 Ethical considerations

When working with narratives and images, concepts of anonymity (both of the participants as well as any additional persons photographed) and ownership require careful management (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Mannay, 2016; Margolis & Pauwels, 2011). For this reason, the initial participant information and informed consent documents were particularly important and stated clearly that the participants had ownership of the photos taken by them. I also highlighted to participants that they needed to obtain permission from other persons appearing in the photos to share these with me and use them in the research process. As already mentioned, the images were used purely as reflection and discussion prompts, were only seen by myself and did not constitute data.

The personal in-depth nature of narratives and the use of photos during interviews had the capacity to stimulate unexpected emotional responses (Collier, 1957); I reflected on the most appropriate response to such situations particularly prior to the photo-elicitation interviews.

The photo-elicitation element was the most varied and differently interpreted by the participants. Two participants shared no images, although neither did so out of a conscious choice not to, they simply had not found the time to do so. One of these used her webcam in the second interview to illustrate visually her learning environment. One participant misinterpreted the remit and seemed to fixate on the example of sharing a screenshot, which she requested her course tutor's permission for. I felt uncomfortable about this and was conscious of how it may have been interpreted by the tutor as covert judging of their course materials. Some participants restricted themselves to one or two photos of their study station, while others provided many photographs of a range of environments, people and objects, which were discussed and reflected on at length, some elected to share course assignments, or general documentation reflecting life events. As a process, I found this element intense at times. Although the participants were fully aware of this phase of the study, having read and signed the information sheet and consent form, I felt self-conscious and prying when instructing participants how to go about this towards the end of the first interview. Later, when viewing the files uploaded to the shared Box, I again felt somewhat intrusive yet at the same time, privileged as some of the personal and ultimately private aspects of their lives participants had chosen to share with me, a relative stranger. However, during the second interview the participants were comfortable and relaxed while talking through their selections, which, in turn helped me feel more at ease.

The way participants talked through their images and documents was also varied.

Some volunteered very little, and required extensive prompting, while others talked

extensively about and around the image, often using it as a springboard to other areas and experiences meaning my role was largely that of listener.

Further ethical considerations include the power relations at play in any researcher-participant relationship. The collaborative co-constructive approach I took, facilitated a more equitable relationship, although a constant reflexive stance was required throughout to ensure any power imbalances were made explicit and considered when analysing and interpreting data.

During the data generation and analysis process, I regularly shared my analyses and interpretations with participants in order to allow them the opportunity to check my representation and retelling of their stories was truthful and accurately reflected their experiences. This member checking was an important way to ensure reliability, or trustworthiness in this totally interpretive study.

4.7 Summary of chapter

This chapter has shown how my constructivist on ontology and interpretivist epistemology have determined my choice of narrative inquiry and associated co-constructive methods of data generation and analysis. Having detailed the research design process, the next chapter presents the findings of the study along with my interpretation and discussion of how they provide answers to my research questions.

The next part of the thesis concerns the findings from the study as well as the further interpretation and discussion of these with reference to the original research questions. The first chapter introduces the twelve participants and highlights the meaningful episodes which formed the data set for further analysis. The following

three findings chapters introduce the participants and then present the three themes identified during analysis of the significant episodes: discordant and disempowering interactions; enabling and empowering interactions; situated and metacognitive interactions. The discussion chapter synthesises and further interprets the findings through the lens of the theoretical framework and seeks to address the research questions guiding the study. I examine the interactions engaged in by the participants in terms of complex, multi-layered transactions and personal agency. I then go on to recast the theory of transactional distance grounded in the narratives of the ODLs in this study.

Chapter 5: Findings – Introducing the participants

The space restrictions of this thesis necessitated a difficult decision regarding the presentation of the 12 participants and their stories. Ideally, I would have liked to present a fuller description and case study of each participant, however, the word count restrictions obliged me to forego this. Instead, I present here a mini profile of each participant. In order to maintain anonymity, as well as pseudonyms, I have only vaguely stated the individual's location as geographic region, rather than specific country.

5.1 Abigail

Abigail, a former nurse, is now healthcare trainer based in Western Europe studying an education related Masters. She enrolled on an ODE course in the field of online education to gain a theoretical and research-informed underpinning to her practice, which involves training medics, often in an online environment. She particularly appreciates the flexibility of DE due to her work, which entails regular travel abroad. She also enjoys having the opportunity to engage with fellow students and learn from a wider range of perspectives and experiences. Abigail has found it stimulating to study outside of her comfort zone having chosen a different field of study to her previous professional training. She has found that the learning from her course has directly impacted on her professional practice as she has become an authority on online training related queries.

5.2 Annie

Annie, an experienced ODL, is a freelance HE lecturer and a part-time nurse from Western Europe. She is studying an education-related master's degree. Annie

declares that she is 'quite a self-directed learner in the sense that [she is] not always strictly following the programme set by the university'. She has forged a unique pathway through her masters in a patchwork way; having completed the initial 60-credit module at one institution, she completed a further module at an alternative institution on a topic related to her career goal. She is now hoping to combine all her credits back at the original institution to complete her MA. The programme has prompted Annie to seek out a career change, having become particularly interested in one aspect of the discipline.

5.3 Chetna

Chetna works in the government sector in the Indian Ocean region, she was studying a policy related master's degree, which she completed towards the end of our discussions. She chose a DE programme as she wanted to gain an international perspective on her discipline. She appreciates the structure of the programme and that 'everything is on the spot for students' as well as regular opportunities for interaction with tutors and peers. Despite the regular opportunities for interaction, of which 'three quarters is study focussed', she does feel lonely, which she attributes to the lack of social interaction 'not being able to talk freely with friends on the course' having been 'used to face-to-face conversations with lecturers in [country]'.

5.4 Colette

Colette is a lecturer at a European DE institution and is currently doing an ODE master's programme at a UK institution. Colette is an experienced ODL having obtained three undergraduate degrees via DE. She is midway through her programme and is also simultaneously studying a face-to-face master's at a different

institution. Her motivations for doing the programme are to gain knowledge of the theoretical underpinning to her professional role. Colette enjoys the interactive components of the programme, of which there are asynchronous and synchronous platforms.

5.5 Fred

Fred is an academic/learning technologist at a Western European university. He is an accomplished academic holding a PhD and has participated in and led several funded research projects. He is taking an ODE master's programme at a UK university in education in order to seek intellectual fulfilment from his learning rather than a qualification or career development. He is a social learner and specifically wanted to do the master's programme in order to be challenged and engage in critical dialogue. His employer is paying for the programme and in return, he is expected to bring his learning back to share with colleagues. Fred has an enthusiastic approach to his learning, which he enjoys and finds it complements his work well. He describes himself as being 'immersed' in the discipline and does not demarcate between work, study and personal life as he has a strong interest in the discipline, 'it's an everyday every hour sort of thing'.

5.6 Lucy

Lucy was until recently, an online course editor at a Western European university. She is midway through an education-related master's degree at a UK university, which she chose due to its practical skills-based nature being of more direct relevance to her preferred career pathway. Lucy is enjoying her studies but feels as an ODL occasionally at a slight disadvantage compared to the 'on-campus majority'

on the same programme. Lucy found her studying had a significant impact on her own and colleagues' professional performance as she became 'the go to person' in her team for certain activities. She describes how her learning provided a deeper understanding of her role, which in turn enhanced her enjoyment and performance. She also has valued the opportunity to engage intellectually and successfully with academic work as a mature professional learner, having been less conscientious while an undergraduate.

5.7 Marion

Marion is a surgeon in North America, she has recently completed an online master's in health research at a UK university. Marion felt this field would be a useful area in which to develop her expertise and enable her to contribute to her community. She notes the main challenges have been a result of increased workload having changed jobs as well as the nature of her role being often unpredictable and intensive.

Marion is a self-sufficient autonomous learner, being comfortable working through course materials independently and not feeling a strong need to interact socially or academically with peers or tutors. However, she acknowledged the collegiality of group members has also found the exposure to wider international contexts from her peers valuable. She has found that her learning has contributed positively to the educator aspect of her role in terms of working with learners on critical appraisal of studies and increasing awareness of clinical trials.

5.8 Roseanne

Roseanne is a scientific researcher in a pharmaceutical company based in Western Europe. She is midway through a master's in health research, which she was

motivated to do for reasons of career security when faced with the threat of redundancy. She is also nearing the end of an online undergraduate statistics course which she is doing for similar reasons and to enhance her general understanding and performance in her work. Roseanne is an experienced ODL having already completed a health-related masters. She values the flexibility of DE and the fact that she can continue working and earning while studying. Despite having embarked on studying for career reasons, she has now come to value the additional intellectual benefits of 'lifelong learning' and predicts that she will always be engaged in some form of learning having developed an 'appetite' for studying and in order to 'remain alert'.

5.9 Safi

Safi is a clinician based in Eastern Africa studying a master's in health research, which she chose to gain a deeper understanding of her work. She fits in study around work and family priorities. She has access to a supportive academic community in her workplace. As a result of her studies, she is able to see the bigger picture and has opportunities to apply her learning in an authentic environment. Consequently, her professional practice is easier, more effective and more interesting. She notes how her colleagues have seen her 'risen through the ranks' as a result of her study. Additionally, Safi has experienced a change in her personal and intellectual outlook in terms of her improved skills set and self-awareness.

5.10 Sasha

Sasha is a pharmacy graduate from Eastern Europe working in the field of clinical research. He is studying a master's in health research, which he chose to gain expertise in the field. He initially found the programme challenging having

underestimated the complexity and demands of DE. The fact that he is a non-native speaker of English exacerbated this as did the fact that he works full-time and received little support or interest from his employer. He speaks positively about the groupwork element of his course; he derived great benefit from the interaction, different perspectives, teamwork dynamic and mutual support and empathy from this element. He notes that the general lack of learner-learner interaction is a disadvantage of ODE. Having developed a more reflective and self-aware perspective, he feels more in control of his learning and is able to create his own structure and independent knowledge-seeking behaviour.

5.11 Shona

Shona, an experienced ODL from Western Europe, is retired and is studying an education related master's. Her motivation to study is largely a result of wanting to keep herself busy intellectually since she became paraplegic following an accident at work. She enjoys the international nature of the cohort, which develops 'real-world' skills of collaborating globally, although she regrets the absence of close relationships and face-to-face interaction with peers. Her disability means she has become familiar with a range of assistive technologies, without which she would not be able to study. Shona views herself as atypical as her approach to study is 'challenge-based', by which she means her efforts go into the aspects of the course she finds more challenging rather than the easier aspects she already has knowledge of. Her motivation is not focussed on gaining high grades, so her efforts go into the learning process rather than the assessment product.

5.12 Tamac

Tamac is a clinical trial monitor based in Eastern Africa. She is studying a master's in health research in order to enhance her knowledge and understanding of her work practices. She finds the course challenging because of the lack of interaction with tutors and peers, she explains learning individually through reading is difficult. For this reason, she values the synchronous events with the tutors and other students. She organises her study time around work and family, devoting time early in morning and late at night to her academic work. She notes that in addition to the course content, this has taught her self-discipline and time-management skills.

Having introduced the 12 participants with whom data was generated, the next chapter will present the findings obtained through analysis of the data.

Chapter 6: Findings – Presenting the themes

This chapter presents the findings of the analysis I conducted on the participants' significant episodes using the 5-part listening guide analysis technique. The narratives, or significant episodes, forming the data set for analysis, are listed in Table 6.1 below.

Chapter 6: Findings

	NO	PARTICIPANT	NARRATIVE	SUB-THEME/CODE	SUB-THEME/CODE	SUB-THEME/CODE
DISCORD & DISEMPOWERMENT	1	Marion	“nobody really cares”	Roles & identities	Influence of professional context	Work v. study
	2	Marion	“tied up doing other things”	Collegiality v. time	Influence of professional context	Levels of engagement
	5	Shona	“the stuff wasn’t logical”	Lack of structure/clarity	Lack of control	Levels of engagement
	27	Tamac	“I was just waiting for other students to start posting”	Not taking ownership/responsibility	Nature of interface	Confidence/perceived ridicule
	13	Annie	“it gets a bit frictious at times”	Empathy v. frustration	Roles & identities	
	14	Annie	“a control freak”	No agency		
	22	Fred	“I just want to talk to people about this stuff”	immersion	Roles & identities	Levels/type of engagement
	25	Abigail	“the troublemaker cohort”	Agency, choice	Alliances	
	33	Chetna	“not everything can be discussed”	Agency v. structure	Nature of interface	Levels/type of engagement
	23	Sasha	“I’m mostly along with this study”	Agency, control	engagement	Ownership, responsibility
	x ¹	Shona	“there’s got to be a collaborative portion”	Agency v. structure	Levels/type of engagement	

¹Episodes labelled ‘x’ in Table 6.1 are those identified following later stages of categorisation, they did not constitute the original data set.

Chapter 6: Findings

	20	Lucy	“it’s more strategic than anything”	Authentic -> strategic	Comparison to peers	Engagement
SITUATED & SELF-REGULATORY	28	Tamac	“studying alone”	Teacher as mediator of learning	Teaching presence	
	19	Lucy	“I was the go-to person”	Improved status, professional identity	Influence of professional context	Applied learning
	32	Safi	“it makes my job easier, effective, interesting”			Applied learning
	31	Safi	“the lecturer is able to tell you what they’re expecting”	Teacher as mediator of learning	Teaching presence	
	30	Roseanne	“It makes the experience more concrete”	Constructing one’s own PLE	Reification of learning	
	15 & 16	Annie	“go off on a bit of a different route”	Constructing own learning pathway	Time (deadlines) provides focus	
	x	Colette	“it’s a stream of consciousness”	Constructing one’s own PLE		
	4	Colette	“I’m just having a chat”	Contrived -> authentic	Constructing own PLE	Agency, choice
	7	Shona	“I like to do it my way”	Constructing one’s own learning journey	Reification of learning	Studying on a challenge basis
	21	Fred	“my life is in Evernote”	Immersion	Constructing one’s own knowledge structure	Reifying knowledge
	17	Chetna	International perspectives			
	x	Abigail	“I thought let’s just flipchart it out”	metacognition	Embodied learning, physicality	

Chapter 6: Findings

	x	various		Time provides structure and focus	Time promotes discipline & creativity	
	24	Sasha	“the key to success”	Ownership, responsibility	Agency, control	
	34	Chetna	“I didn’t really care ... but now I think twice”	Changed outlook		
NOURISHING & EMPOWERING	26	Abigail	“they were very chalk and cheese”	emotional nourishment	Social presence	
	8	Shona	“I wanted something to make my mind think”	Creating healthy spaces	Study as a way to maintain health	
	29	Roseanne	“it’s a long way to say it’s not a sacrifice”	Levels of engagement	immersion	
	3	Colette	“we were able to sort out each other’s misconceptions”	Wider perspectives	Changed outlook	Social construction of knowledge
	x	Roseanne	Diet plan	Healthy mind/body		

Table 6.1 Overview of participants’ significant episodes

Due to the nature of narrative analysis and the Listening Guide approach, the analyses themselves are an important part of the data set, in a similar way to analytic memos. As I described in the methodology chapter, my own approach to narrative analysis is not that of Labov's structural analysis, my role as researcher is co-creator of the participants' narratives. Therefore, in this chapter I endeavour to retell the participants' stories, using their words but edited for clarity and conciseness, I interweave their stories with my own analytic comments.

Unfortunately, the extended narratives constituting the participants' significant episodes are not able to be included in their full form either here in the body of the thesis, nor in an appendix due to word count restrictions². I have therefore kept lengthy data excerpts to a minimum, which means my own analytic narrative becomes even more important as it functions as the bridge between the raw data and the more interpretive discussion. The narratives are structured according to the analysis sheets (see Figure 4.3 in the methodology chapter), so they introduce the plot, or main idea, then proceed to a closer inspection of the 'voices' comprising the I Poem (the verb phrases and the subject pronouns), and the stanzas, as well as some observations on ToI. The observations relating to TD are located in the following discussion chapter.

During analysis, it soon became apparent that the analytic lens of ToI was insufficient for categorising the interactions which were significant for the participants. I

² Lancaster University requires that appendices are included in the word count for the PhD in E-research & TEL.

therefore adopted the alternative approach of categorising the interactions according to the function they performed, or the effect they had on the participants' experience. I identified three functional categories:

- discordant and disempowering interactions
- nourishing and empowering interactions
- situated and self-regulatory interactions

Following this categorisation, I returned to the data to identify further episodes which aligned to the categories; these are labelled 'x' in Table 6.1 as they did not constitute the original data set. The remainder of this chapter presents the three categories.

6.1 'There was no synergy there': discordant and disempowering interactions

These narratives comprise rich and powerful data as they adopt a more traditional story format centred around a conflict, or complicating action told to illustrate or exemplify a point. The participants shared stories of how they experienced conflict in the roles and identities they adopted during their learning, as well as in the form of barriers which prevented them from fully engaging. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the participants are professional adults studying part-time, they adopt a range of roles and identities, which are not always in harmony. The participants describe how their, co-learners, discussion forums, collaborative task design, and professional context were sources of conflict and disconnect.

6.1.1 Co-learners as a source of conflict

In Annie's experience of groupwork (narrative 13), we see empathy in her awareness of the barriers some of her peers face, which is in conflict with the frustration she feels at the different cultural approaches to groupwork. Annie's I Poem highlights the lack of sense of community in the single instance of 'we', which is surprising in a narrative describing groupwork. Communication between learners and between Annie and her peers is characterised by socio-cultural barriers. The internal conflict is significant as she indicates, when describing an earlier experience, that connectedness is important for her: 'that was really nice because we logged all in one big chat box with other people and for some reason I felt connect to the other students'. In some respects, there is evidence of connection between Annie and certain of her peers, seen in her empathy for and understanding of the socio-cultural backgrounds of those who are not familiar with Western groupwork norms and expectations: 'they come from a culture where it's pretty much you've got a tutor standing in front of you in a big lecture theatre, he talks, you have to make notes [...] so they didn't have a clue about groupwork'. However, overall Annie is not able to engage from a position of equality, due to the disconnects she observes among her peers and the internal conflict she experiences as a result: 'for me, that is still a bit tricky, because on the one hand, I want to take into account other people's needs and preferences, but on the other hand, I think sometimes, aargh, I'm not their mom!'.

In the 'control freak' episode (narrative 14), Annie describes a grouping which she finds quite destructive as 'it was just so controlling'. This episode 'was horrible, really', purely due to the personality and behaviour of one group member, the

'control freak'. Annie finds the experience particularly distressing because, although she is 'quite a self-directed learner', who likes to be in control of her learning, she describes having no input to the task. However, there is a sense of triumph at the end when she regains some control by using the institutional structures to her advantage in the reflective task and 'got better marks than they got'. This triumph is perhaps particularly rewarding as it is shared with a peer whom she has previously developed a more constructive relationship.

Lucy (narrative 20 introduces the whole thesis) changes her approach to discussion forum contributions, from contributing brief simple posts as per the instructors' advice, to feeling obliged to produce longer, more formal posts, in order to emulate what she observed her peers doing. Despite this lengthy process not being required and not aligning to Lucy's time frames, she makes the decision to follow her co-learners' lead. This then leads to resentment, a lack of meaningful engagement and a subsequent reluctance to contribute in further modules. As well as peer pressure, Lucy attributes this strategic approach to the grading. Her initial approach appears more authentic as she talks of 'my thoughts', but the change results in a focus on the product rather than a genuinely reflective process; it becomes about the grade and not about her learning. Lucy's I Poem highlights the comparisons she makes between herself and her co-learners: 'no-one else', 'everyone else'. Despite this discussion forum task being a group task, there is only minimal use of 'we'; she uses 'we' in the final stanza when identifying with the group, but then concludes with the 'I' comparison. The grading may have rendered this group task a more individualistic strategic activity for Lucy. LII is indirectly referred to through the instructions and

grading, so while instructors are not involved in this activity, their presence shapes the experience for Lucy.

6.1.2 The constraining nature of discussion forums

More general disconnects, or barriers, arise from the academic environment in the form of the interface, in particular, the discussion forums and collaborative task design.

In narrative 22, Fred describes his experience of the discussion forums, which he had hoped would be ‘a rich way of engaging people around the issues’. He chose to study at master’s level, already having a PhD, in the belief that it would provide him with the intellectual and critical engagement with like-minded people that was lacking in his professional context. His initial forum posts were therefore ‘quite lengthy’, which attracted little engagement from peers and resulted in his tutors suggesting he ‘keep it more light touch’. This in turn led to Fred feeling constrained and unable to engage fully with the issues raised in the course: ‘I had to step back and just hold myself from engaging too much and overpowering’. It ultimately causes him to adopt a different identity, which is enabled due to his prior professional experience and studies:

I could talk 24 hours nonstop about it, the thing is it’s my life, and when you go into that forum and you’re working with co-learners you have to recognise not everybody’s in the same space as you, so whilst it’s frustrating you can also step back and reflect on that and say actually you’ve got a different role to play here, so you can be more enabling and more facilitatory as well as asking questions.

Fred sees himself as an atypical learner in that he is focussed less on achieving the qualification than on engaging with the content, and he recognises that others have different motivations. However, there is a sense of frustration and disappointment in this narrative; the fact that it is his life, means he is denying a significant aspect of his identity. This is exacerbated by the tutors' positioning: 'the people I really wanted to challenge and question were the tutors but they were in a role again of facilitating and enabling, not responding, not debating, not really arguing, and that's the way it is'. Fred's resignation, 'and that's the way it is', indicates understanding and acceptance, which is repeated in several other places throughout his interviews, yet there is a tone of regret in his concluding remarks here. The tutors are interacting from a position of power, for the purposes of monitoring and supporting, rather than as intellectual equals or partners, in fact, he refers back to this incident in a later interview by saying 'I got told off on one of the modules for doing too long posts'. He reflects further on how this has resulted in him feeling the need to 'assume the role of student and learner', rather than engage in the egalitarian critical dialogue he craves.

Tamac also expresses disappointment at the lack of discussion board activity, 'I thought [...] everyday would find a question [...] everyday would find a discussion, but it didn't happen', although, in stark contrast to Fred, she admits 'even I didn't post'. She describes her reasons for 'being sceptical about [...] putting a question on the board' in terms of not wanting to appear unknowledgeable in front of her co-learners by asking a 'common sense' question she 'should be knowing'. Despite stating elsewhere that she prefers a dialogic approach to learning, the permanent

and public format of the discussion boards is an obstacle: 'when I ask you, then it's, it's, you know, it's me and you. But now, putting it on board, now everyone is like, know, this guy! What's wrong with her!'. She decides to save face and 'keep it to [herself]'. Tamac's is a personal narrative, with a high proportion of 'I' along with many 'you know', which is indicative of seeking empathy or approval. She switches voice regularly, here and elsewhere, and adopts the imagined voice of her co-learners and their perceived ridicule of her hypothetical questions. Although the interactions illustrated here are primarily those between Tamac and herself, in a similar way to Lucy, her engagement is influenced indirectly by her peers; Tamac refrains from engaging meaningfully as a result an indirect type of LLI, mediated by LSI.

Chetna describes her experience of the discussion forums in terms of a lesser degree of openness than face-to-face situations, particularly in terms of personal and affective interactions, 'our fears [...] our apprehensions [...] what do we find it is good, what we don't find, we cannot say openly'. She indicates that this is due in part to the nature of the platform, 'this is a forum so not everything can be discussed' and the structure imposed by the academy, 'we have been told that there are certain things that can be allowed to discuss online and certain things that cannot be allowed to discuss'. It is not clear whether this refers to the task-related nature of forum discussions, or whether explicit guidelines or rules have been enforced regarding the content of posts. However, Chetna perceives that it is also due to not being able to develop 'direct relationships' in online forums, which results in 'a bit of hesitation'. The (perceived) academy-imposed structure restricts the

development of close personal connections and sense of community as the disallowed affective dialogue does not have a rightful place in the academic, content-related forums.

In contrast to Chetna and Tamac feeling constrained by the formality and structure associated with discussion forums, Shona (narrative 5) describes how the ‘muddled’ and illogical nature of the interactions and unacceptable time-lag between posting and ‘get[ing] an answer’ was problematic for her. Shona’s need for ‘tidy and logical’ suggests a desire to be in control, the lack of order undermines her logical, structured way of studying, although she recognises this may be her personal approach. Shona’s negative evaluation overshadows any positive social learning experience that presumably the forum was intended to generate. Unlike Tamac’s reluctance to engage being due to the lack of forum activity, Shona’s narrative suggests that being active alone is not enough, the activity must have order, clarity and immediacy.

6.1.3 Collaborative task design compromises agency

Collaborative tasks requiring cooperation between individuals can have the effect of preventing learners exercising agency over their learning. Abigail’s ‘study buddy’ story recounts the lack of synergy between her and her assigned study buddy and the importance of having choice of who to collaborate with. Although this episode recounts a disconnect between co-learners, I classify it as a structural disconnect as ultimately it exemplifies the conflict between structure and individual agency. As Abigail ‘never got anything back’ from her assigned buddy, she ‘found another group of three people and we became a group study buddy [. . .] and that was nice’. The

instructors 'weren't that happy about it' but she feels choosing a study buddy rather than being assigned one 'worked better'. Abigail felt the need to 'rebel' against the system and become 'the trouble-maker cohort', in order to extract herself from an imposed, unproductive partnership, to effect a more constructive alliance. This narrative has examples of both positive and negative inter-learner interactions; positive when it is actively sought out and is democratic and complementary; negative when it is uni-directional and imposed by the academy. The positive inter-learner interaction leads to an enhanced understanding or, learner-content interaction (LCI) but more than this, it creates a sense of community and perhaps even the confidence to challenge the system. In this way, the learner-instructor interaction (LII) is characterised by conflict and rebellion, which indicates an imbalance of power between the academy and the learner. Abigail and her study buddies overthrow this when they reject the system and 'went a bit outside'. For Abigail and her allies, the structure of being assigned a study buddy impacts negatively on the learning experience. Only after taking control over her learning pathway and asserting her individual agency, did the learning become productive.

Collaborative tasks inevitably offer less flexibility than individual tasks due to their fixed timings. Shona describes how her physical disability is unaccounted for in this type of task design, which:

There's got to be a collaborative portion in every module now, but that's time restricted and it may be over a two-week, three-week period when I'm not well. I really can't be annoyed if I'm not well. But if it's normal work, I can catch up with work. I can be two weeks behind and if I'm really feeling better.

And if three or four nights I'm alright, I can catch up with two weeks work. I can't do that if it's collaborative work.

The fact that this learning event is designed as a collaborative co-constructed activity, means that each learner must be present and actively engaged at a particular time, thus negating the flexibility of DE which is regularly cited as its most attractive feature.

6.1.4 The professional context as a source of conflict

Moving beyond the academic relationships and structures, work-related priorities can function to prevent learners from fully engaging. Marion describes the professional environment and her colleagues who, while providing practical or logistical support, are not in synergy with her studies. The following excerpt highlights the impact of the absence of this synergy:

My colleagues have been quite supportive in that they ask in advance, you know, please give us dates of when you will, don't want to be on call. . . .
Otherwise, I'm not sure that people really care that much.

Her narrative indicates that her colleagues have little interest in her programme and that it is viewed as a separate, unrelated endeavour to her clinical work. It seems Marion is somewhat isolated in her studies, although she does not describe it in these terms. Here and elsewhere, Marion's narrative places her learning in a separate, unrelated sphere of activity. Her language: 'I just complain to him all the time', 'I'm stressed out', 'I gotta study' does not convey fulfilment or reward from

her studying, rather it seems to be burdensome, an interruption to her work, which takes priority.

In Marion's I Poem, the dominant voice of her closest colleague conveys disinterest: 'you know nobody cares whether you finish it or not. You could just stop and it would be fine. And we can continue on doing our clinical work'. The use of 'you' positions Marion apart, with her studies, which have no perceived benefit for her work. The use of 'we' by her colleague, when referring to the joint work, functions to afford it more value. Where Marion feels obligated to continue and finish, 'I gotta study', her colleague does not share the sentiment. Similarly, singular 'I' is used by Marion when talking about her studying, but 'we' is used to refer to her professional environment, which is suggestive of a stronger identification with her work. Marion interprets collegial support as that which does not actively obstruct her studies; she is afforded the flexibility to arrange professional commitments to fit in with exams and is reminded that 'nobody cares whether you finish or not'. Although, undoubtedly intended to allay her stress, these comments may be interpreted as devaluing her choice. Marion's qualified statement: 'they're/he's supportive in that ...' suggests she recognises that this is less than whole-hearted.

This narrative centres on learner-colleague and professional environment interaction, which in Marion's case, is not an enriching or constructive type of interaction in terms of her learning, rather, it highlights the disconnect between her work and study. This contrasts with other participants, for example, Lucy and Abigail, for whom positive collegial interactions serve to create an enhanced sense of identity as an informed practitioner, whose learning has benefitted the professional space

and therefore afforded them a degree of esteem among colleagues. Marion, on the other hand, identifies more strongly with her work, and, like her colleagues, sees her study as an additional burden offering few professional rewards in return.

Similarly, Marion's description of the groupwork task (narrative 2) suggests that while she appreciates the collegiality offered by the 'go-getters', she is not able to fully engage, being 'tied up doing other things' and detaches herself to a certain extent, becoming an external observer of the group dynamics. This detachment is highlighted in Marion's I Poem; although the topic of this narrative is groupwork, there are only three uses of 'we', compared with seventeen instances of 'I'. This indicates minimal social interaction or sense of community for Marion. The narrative generally makes few references to her peers, which contrasts with Colette, for example, who knows her co-learners by name, profession and nationality. Marion attributes this largely to the lack of time, flexibility and energy caused by her demanding job as a surgeon. There is a sense of regret at not having as much time as she wanted, and the final stanza is suggestive of a need for solidarity or empathy when she switches to the general 'you' and 'you know'. This is another example of the disconnect between Marion's professional role and her learning experience seen in the previous narrative. In both narratives, the learner-professional context interaction is key in preventing Marion from fully engaging with her learning (to the extent that she fails and is required to resit this particular module).

6.1.5 Summary

That conflict and disconnect invariably occur due to lack of agency or control is clearly shown in the narratives in this section. The participants describe having to

adopt different roles and identities than desired or intended as a result of, co-learners' personalities and socio-cultural backgrounds, programme structural restrictions, and professional priorities.

6.2 'It's no sacrifice': Nourishing and empowering interactions

In contrast to the previous theme, the narratives here describe more harmonious and empowering interactions which enable a closeness to and meaningful engagement with the participants' learning. These narratives reveal important structures which participants built around themselves to enhance and enable their learning. These enabling structures included interpersonal connections and mind-body-environment connections.

6.2.1 Interpersonal connections

Interpersonal interactions within and beyond the study environment play a significant role for Abigail in particular. In our first interview, she compares her relationship with two tutors; the first being 'lovely' but 'more formal', while the second:

was absolutely brilliant. In his tutorials, not only did he do the tutorial, but the way he did, he played music, and then he would give like little pop quizzes. [...] And I really felt he, he was very approachable [...] I really felt he was a really lovely person [...] I really felt he gave more than then maybe he needed to; he certainly was very, very, very giving.

The level of enthusiasm and detail with which she describes the second tutor, indicates a strong preference for this individual. She appreciates his 'very giving'

nature over the 'formal relationship' with the first tutor. This echoes the egalitarian dialogue she values described in the earlier narrative about study buddies. She acknowledges she has always been 'more of a heart than a head person' and values compassionate relationships. She talks often throughout our discussions about the support from her husband who is also 'very caring'. For Abigail, these emotional interactions are important sources of support and at times take precedence over academic and professional; the tutors' subject knowledge is mentioned as an aside, the narrative is one of emotional interaction.

The people around Fred also offer support, but as enablers, rather than carers:

you realise that there are certain things that are enabling in your life in terms of allowing you to do these things. And there's so obviously, there's so much that I couldn't have done through my work in my studies without the support of my wife. And that is very incredibly fundamental in all sorts of ways. And I think it she does need acknowledging, because we talk about these spaces and places to do this thinking and working. And they're instrumental and you've been able to carve them out, allow you to do that

This narrative occurs when Fred shares images of significant people, places, objects, and he uses the image of his wife to convey the importance generally of people who 'create the space' to enable him to pursue and achieve his goals.

While, for Fred, the significant people in his life offer support in the sense of giving him 'the space' and 'enabling' or 'allowing' him to pursue his interests, for Sasha, that support is a more fundamental form of encouragement to persevere:

And of course, you will not cope without support from your relatives or your family because at some points you are not alone in your study, but you're you may feel alone at all in it. So, there is you need someone who will tell you that you cannot stop so

The three episodes here illustrate the multiple forms of nourishment ODLs receive from the people they learn, live and work with. Unsurprisingly, these sources of nourishment are interpersonal interactions, but they are located both within the institutional as well as the socio-cultural context. Abigail's narrative describes the LI type and the value she places on the pastoral nature of this. The interaction type described by Fred, on the other hand, is that between learner and socio-cultural environment (his wife and line manager), while these are not direct cognitive transactional relationships, they are important in allowing such to occur by removing potential obstacles. Similarly, for Sasha, the importance of familial encouragement is repeated several times throughout his narrative.

Moving towards the more cognitive aspect of interpersonal interactions, Annie derives strength from the professional community which she seeks out in the absence of interested people in her workplace. She describes how attending a discipline related conference was 'especially helpful to find out that we all kind of had the same struggles'. Colette explains how useful interactive behaviours have been instilled at an early stage by the tutors repeating words and phrases like 'encourage' and 'it's been quite good', 'it's been quite useful', which has allowed a sense of community to develop. She talks positively about her international peers

and describes how they have benefitted her learning in terms of synergies and broadening horizons. Colette talks about 'different experiences' and perspectives, '[challenging] each other's views' and assumptions and '[sorting] out each other's misconceptions', all of which indicate a transformative experience facilitated by the (initially) enforced social interactions resulting in a strongly social constructive experience. The LLI and the 'really interesting range' of socio-cultural backgrounds described here is a positive and enriching experience for Colette (and by implication, her peers), which has provided a valuable learning experience. This has been enabled by the instructor and interface interactions, which encourage and allow easy connections.

These connections take time to become established, as we see in narrative 4 which describes how Colette's approach to contributing to forums has changed during her time on the programme. She began by posting early and being responded to by peers, then moved to posting later and became 'more of a responder'; this is due to her being behind, rather than an active strategic decision. However, this transition is paralleled by a shift from feeling obliged to participate due to assessment requirements: 'I didn't like it to start with because marks are available' and 'talking to lots of people that you just didn't know who they were', to a more authentic form of interaction, where she is 'just having a chat'. Colette also explains how she tailors her interactions to align more closely with 'the people [she] thought were saying interesting things and ignoring the people that [she] didn't like very much'. That the functionality of Colette's institutional virtual learning environment enables such tailoring, in addition to the instructor encouragement, means Colette's interactions

become more personally meaningful. Here we see how interpersonal connections require appropriate academic spaces and explicit and proactive nurturing.

6.2.2 Mind, body and environment connections

These insights were particularly prevalent during the second phase of interviews during which participants shared their images, which often depicted rest, relaxation and sustenance.

In Roseanne's description of her exercise regime and diet plan, we can see how her academic life is very much intertwined with her personal life. In fact, her physical well-being has the effect of becoming a productivity 'tool' to enhance her learning ability.

I had this personal trainer I would go to twice a week and it did help with my physical health [. . .] Then in turn I was more able to concentrate for longer periods, I was more efficient because I could feel how healthier. [. . .] And for me a good way to be productive is to also keep fit. So that's why I put that because it's a very important tool in my toolbox.

The connection between the academic and the personal spaces is all-encompassing for Roseanne, to the extent that her personal learning environment is hardly distinguishable from the rest of her life. She responds to my question about whether she feels she's making sacrifices having to spend free time studying, which she strongly feels is not the case: 'No, no, I don't, I don't, no. Not at all. . . . No, it's not a sacrifice. It's a long way to say it's not a sacrifice'. Roseanne's narrative conveys her enthusiasm and love for learning in the broadest sense as an enhancement of life, it

is enjoyable for her and even has a positive impact on her personal relationship, she jokes 'we're bonding over mathematics theory'. She recognises the effort and subsequent rewards improve all areas of her life, and she makes no separation between study life and personal life, echoing Fred's observation that 'learning is pretty much living'. This is a narrative characterised by connections between herself and her intellect, her relationships, her daily life, which are all enhanced and strengthened as a result of her study: 'I feel I'm more and more observant, and in my day to day life, I pick up on things [...] it's definitely, definitely related to the fact that I'm always constantly engaging my intellect'. Roseanne explains how the ODE is more than a programme of study, for her it is 'a life choice and it's . . . about discovering [herself] and in challenging and being challenged intellectually', which she finds 'life-enhancing'.

Other participants articulate similar recognition of the importance of mental and physical health, although they approach this in the sense of actively seeking some form of separation from study in order to return refreshed and nourished bodily and spiritually, as Sasha describes:

And you know, what really makes me distract from study or to like to forget about it for some time is my travel [. . .] this is something that I cannot imagine my study without because if I will not have an opportunity to relax and not to think about it, I will have no energy to continue it.

Similarly, walking is important for Fred, as a form of distancing from intellectual work, touching on spirituality:

every time I walk to work, I walk through a place called [name] Cemetery in [city] and it's like an arboretum is full of trees and flowers. It's wonderful. But it's also, this is not to be morbid, a kind of [...] a reality check. So, I quite like walking through this space every day. Because it's, it's just a nudge to say life is short, it ends and you've got only a finite amount of time to do stuff and get on with it. And one day I'll be in the ground or wherever.

He refers to this walking commute elsewhere as a punctuation to his working day, however, Fred's dedication to and complete immersion in his work and study, means these walks ultimately contribute to his learning:

because those walks to work, if I've got an idea, I can put it into Evernote straight away on the phone. I can take photos. I can record. I can type in notes and I know it's there, regardless of where I am. And that's transformed the way I work.

Even his coffee indulgence, his 'constant companion' which 'has sustained [him] all the way through', becomes a prop in a work-based task: 'I thought I'd use the whole topic of coffee as the kind of one to theme it around and use that as an illustration'. So, Fred's approach is aligned more to Roseanne's in terms of being completely immersed in their learning, and an intentional blurring of boundaries between the academic, personal, and professional spheres.

In contrast, for Shona, studying is a tool she uses to achieve well-being: 'I was in hospital lying flat on my back. I was getting depressed. So that's why I decided to come back to study.' She relates what initially prompted her to embark on her ODE

journey is also what propelled her through the initial difficulties. Being paraplegic is an important part of her story and she returns to this throughout our discussions.

The driver behind many of Shona's decisions is the desire to keep her mind busy and avoid depression by not allowing it time to dwell on her physical condition. This is seen not only in her extensive studying and volunteering, but also in her hobbies, which she does between courses; she thrives on challenge and actively seeks it. So, in contrast to other participants whose hobbies and interests provide the break from study, Shona uses study as a break from life: 'my hobby is studying [. . .] it keeps my brain going. And then that lets my brain not have to think about other things'.

6.2.3 Summary

This attention to interpersonal relationships, physical, mental and spiritual well-being indicates a high level of self-awareness, which, for these participants at least, provides the balance and nourishment needed to remain fresh and be able to focus on their goals. These narratives demonstrate the participants' clear conceptions of what sustains them in life as well as in their learning (about which some make less distinction than others) and their ability to create the spaces they need to maintain their cognitive, emotional, and physical health and wellbeing.

6.3 'It gives you the know-how of why': Situated and self-regulatory interactions

The professional context provides the initial motivations for the majority of participants embarking on a professional master's programme, so the importance of being able to apply one's learning to the professional context features as a positive aspect of the participants' experience. Applied or authentic learning is also illustrated

in the self-regulatory narratives where the participants adopt a personal and contextualised approach to their learning.

6.3.1 Situated professional learning

A desire to gain a deeper understanding of one's professional role is a key motivator for participants. Colette 'thought it would be useful to have a bit more sort of theoretical underpinning of sort of what I've been doing for the last 10 years', while Abigail sought to gain 'more credibility [...] to back up some of my ideas', to 'give a better argument' and not to 'sound like a good amateur'. Sasha, Safi and Tamac all expressed a need for further insights to support their practical on the job training:

because actually we were working with in an area of clinical research, but we don't know much about expertise, which can give me which this program can give me (Sasha)

because I'm currently involved in clinical trials here in [country], because I've been learning on job, I've had just job training, so I wanted to do more and clearly understand what it entails in terms of doing the clinical trials and managing it (Safi)

the reason for doing this course is that I am a clinical trial monitor, and how with a background of nursing, paediatric nursing, so being a monitor, I thought it was important for me to have knowledge on clinical trials. Cause I've been doing monitoring without the knowledge (Tamac)

Some participants have a more skills-focussed reason for beginning their study, but later highlight theoretical underpinning as a key benefit of their experience; Lucy recognises 'doing this degree has helped me understand why we do things the way

we do', and Roseanne is now 'able to join many, many, many dots'. Chetna has become more socially aware and engaged with her local socio-political context.

A further benefit, which comes particularly from the ODE aspect of participants' experiences, are the international perspectives from co-learners, which provide alternative insights into participants' job roles as well as being 'able to sort out each other's misconceptions' (Colette). Chetna, while being the only learner from her country on her programme, appreciated learning 'the perspective of how things are done in [others'] country', while Safi and Marion have appreciated the ability to compare differences in procedures:

There are people from different areas, in some of us being from the countries that are not really well up, if you compare our set-up and developed countries is totally different. So, the way they do their things and the way we do things is totally different. So, it's helpful consultant to find how other people do and how do things in the clinical research set up as compared to us in the developing countries where we have limited resources (Safi)

I think a little bit of it was also having a wider appreciation of trials outside of [continent] right, like, like internationally, you know, understanding or thinking about problems in other parts of the world that we don't think about here. Right? They have developed like Western world, you know, infectious disease, things, like availability, support, healthcare systems, how they work in different places. So, I think I learned from that perspective, as well (Marion).

Like most of the participants, Safi has been rewarded by seeing her job role from different perspective. She has a more informed understanding of 'the science behind it', 'it gives you the knowhow of why' and 'it makes [her] job easier, effective, more interesting'. Although this is to be expected, given that all the participants are engaged on a professional programme, it highlights the significance of this and the added value it brings to the learning experience. There are also indications that this is a reciprocal interaction, in that the satisfaction and reward may increase her confidence and connection to the content as she describes how 'after you read the course materials ... it's really been of help, I'd say I think it's the best thing I did to pick up on the course'. Furthermore, Safi also has access to a workplace academic community, from whom she can seek programme related advice and guidance.

Learning which can be applied in the professional context can also be a source of professional validation. For several participants, a direct result of their study is a sense of being valued by colleagues. Abigail has become known as 'the online lady' among her international colleagues, who contact her for advice, and her manager has nominated her to lead on a major project. Lucy became 'the go to person for that kind of thing' and gained a degree of professional autonomy by becoming more self-sufficient with her newly acquired expertise. Similarly, Safi notes how she 'ended up now being a manager' and her colleagues have 'seen how [she's] raised through the ranks'. Roseanne's colleagues 'are quite, quite jealous':

because they see that as a as it's great that [she's] taking time off to just digest some of the scientific papers and scientific work that is done out there, which in [their] day to day job [they] never have time

For Fred, his learning is a collective endeavour and was a factor in his initially gaining his employer's permission to do the course as it was seen as a way to benefit Fred's wider professional community: 'So the idea is that I bring that back into our practice and get us thinking, and I think that's worked reasonably well'.

This deeper thinking and broader awareness about professional roles, as well as a sense of enhanced performance of the individual as well as the workplace generally, is the result of the interplay of interactions between the programme content, co-learners, the professional context and initial work-related motivations and interests.

6.3.2 Self-regulatory interactions

The participants generally demonstrate a high level of self-regulation, they enjoy learning for learning's sake and the rewards that come from personally relevant and meaningful educational transactions. The narratives in this section illustrate the importance of having the freedom and autonomy to create such personal learning environments.

6.3.2.1 Taking ownership and responsibility for one's learning

Distance and its inherent challenges can ultimately lead to a rewarding experience if individual responsibility is recognised and acted on.

Sasha describes his initial experiences of ODE, which were characterised by being unprepared for the amount and type of studying he would have to do, 'I was expecting less information and there was pretty much a lot of it'. Coping alone with this volume of 'information' was a major challenge for Sasha. He contrasts this with his previous learning experiences, which were face-to-face and provided immediate

answers to questions and tutor support. Although he acknowledges the provision of support via the VLE, it is implied that he did not make use of this, perhaps because he thought that '[he] would cope better'. Nevertheless, he accepts full ownership for this, stating that he was simply not realistic about the demands of the programme as well as the language barrier: 'It was more my loss, because I didn't cope with the amount of information, with information in English and with time'. This acceptance of the situation and his own role in that, without seeking to attribute blame elsewhere, is perhaps a factor which contributed ultimately to the subsequent transformation he experiences having taken control of his learning described next.

In narrative 24, Sasha reflects on how he is now enjoying the experience, he is inspired, enthused and motivated, 'at this point, I'm having pleasure, you know, I'm just doing what I like [...] I'm not tired, I'm more encouraged'. This is largely due to the personal satisfaction and sense of achievement he has gained from learning how to learn. Sasha derives a significant degree of satisfaction from understanding and mastering the learning process, rather than understanding the discipline itself, 'it's not about the material you're learning but your approach to the whole learning process [...] Now, it's a process that I do really like'. He reflects on the skills he has taught himself, 'methodologically, I know how to do it, how to do it efficiently in the way of covering information, finding vital findings, finding significant information, and, you know, collating it and getting some important conclusions'.

A similar transformation is experienced by Abigail; she describes how having struggled through a challenging module, which was outside her comfort zone, she later sees the tangible results of her perseverance when contributing to a discussion:

somebody said that was a very socio-political view of it. I thought oh my gosh, somehow that the learning has come through but that I found that module really hard last year, a year of that, but I'm really glad now. I realised it was a good module for me to do.

In contrast, where individual responsibility and ownership is absent, there are barriers to engagement as seen in Tamac's 'studying alone' episode (narrative 28). She describes the challenges of being separated from the tutor, which she feels makes studying lonelier and more challenging. Although she acknowledges the interaction opportunities provided, she considers these less effective than classroom-based interactions, 'when you have a face to face conversation is easier than having to read and understand by yourself'. She explains that dialogue and exchanging ideas would provide reassurance that she is understanding correctly. She indicates a preference for a transmission mode of teaching where the tutor breaks down and simplifies concepts in order to 'pass information to students'. There is an indication in the phrase, 'break it down to a level of a student', that Tamac perceives a hierarchical instructor-learner relationship in which the instructor is responsible for the learning process.

6.3.2.2 Forging a personal learning pathway

Accepting ownership and responsibility for one's learning is also enacted through the construction of an individually relevant approach to one's study.

Annie describes her proactive and self-sufficient approach to learning in narratives 15 and 16. She actively seeks out learning experiences she considers important for her interests and goals and forges her own pathway despite the considerable effort required to achieve this. Not only does Annie create her own route through the material, she also adopts a mix and match approach by constructing a programme using modules from different institutions in search of a high-quality relevant experience. The additional types of interaction at play in this approach are Annie's interests and motivations, which prompt her to 'go off on a bit of a different route'. Earlier in our discussion, she relates how during her undergraduate studies, she was interested in working with older people, which was not catered for at her institution, so she enrolled with an overseas institution offering this topic as a one-off DE module. So, Annie is very much in tune with her interests and personal motivations, which shape how she interacts with the institutional programme structures and content.

Where the professional context is not conducive for applying her learning, Roseanne actively creates opportunities by attending 'conferences or events that relate to the themes in the course'. Here, Roseanne talks to one of the documents she chose to share to illustrate her learning experience. The document is a flyer for a conference she attended, which she describes as a 'rabbit hole', a concept she repeats throughout her narrative. It is a concept which illustrates the opposite effect of a rabbit hole, in that her learning broadens her outlook and places it in the real world,

making it 'concrete' and 'brings it to life'. She seeks to socialise the learning by meeting 'all sorts of people' at such events, which helps her to situate her learning and deepen her understanding and means the learning is 'no longer dry', it becomes 'unbelievably interesting'. The intellectual journey is a strong narrative throughout my discussions with Roseanne, her enthusiasm, active engagement, and 'being curious beyond the course' are consistent voices in all three interviews. Autonomy is evident here, she has some control over her outcomes and pathways by going beyond the academy-imposed structure down the 'rabbit holes'; she has created her own world of learning, of which the formal curriculum is only the starting point.

Safi's narrative suggests she has choice over the learning content and structure, which is mediated by the learning objectives and core and optional content. This enables her to plan her engagement according to her personal and professional responsibilities. Similarly, Shona has the freedom to direct her efforts to core content and that which she finds interesting or challenging, she does not 'bother with' the optional tasks. Shona's approach to engaging with the learning material also depends on her prior knowledge and experience, she describes how, her professional experience within a particular topic meant she was able to complete the activities rapidly. In narrative 7, she describes how she constructed a physical immersive experience in response to a learning task, 'instead of going on the internet and using somebody else's information and pictures, etc. me and non-medical helper went down to Covent Garden'. She asserts this resulted in a more personal and engaging outcome because she 'took pictures, found out information [she] wouldn't have

found out because [she] would have used other people's pictures'. This approach is very much aligned to Shona's learning ethos: 'I like to do it my way'.

6.3.2.3 Constructing a personal learning environment

The participants often described using specific tools to complement and facilitate their learning.

A powerful recurring transaction throughout Fred's narrative is his use of the note-taking software – Evernote. He introduces Evernote, 'basically, it's my life online [. . .] I carry it around with me everywhere', to explain and illustrate his approach to study in response to my question about time-management. He uses Evernote as a study system, 'a distillation', 'a knowledge structure', a way to 'capture' and synthesise, to create and construct his learning. In other words, Fred's use of Evernote enables him to manage and control his learning. He makes an active decision to immerse himself and not separate study, work and personal life, these boundaries are purposefully blurred for Fred:

it's an everyday every hour thing, so because this is a vocation for me, I don't make that distinction about having to manage my time in such way as other people might. [. . .] I could talk 24 hours nonstop about it, the thing is it's my life.

Evernote facilitates this blurring; this LTI is an ongoing learning process. The tool transforms the learning process since it fully complements and enhances the way Fred works. It facilitates a deeper learning due to the connections it makes possible

between thoughts, ideas, conversations, work projects, study materials and assignments. In this way, the tool ensures meaningful interaction with the content.

Colette describes how she manipulates the learning interface to enable her to direct her attention towards co-learners whose contributions she values, and vice versa, she can avoid those 'who were coming across as a bit sort of stuck up'. She uses Facebook in a similar way to enhance and facilitate the learning process: 'it's a stream of consciousness . . . whatever I'm thinking, anything it relates to studying, I'll just put it on there . . . partly a collection of resources . . . it's a little bit of everything', as well as a source of interaction with co-learners. She even indicates her familiarity with Facebook has enabled her to adopt a more pragmatic approach to interactions within the academic networks. In this way, Facebook functions as a personal learning environment, a bridge between the academic and personal sphere.

Abigail recounts a more primitive type of tool. She describes how she has developed a physical approach to writing assignments which entails the use of flipchart paper to assist with the structuring and assembling of the constituent parts:

So when I was writing for the last huge assignment, you know it was 6000 words, so there was four bits of flip chart paper, so it was like okay, this is the thousand word piece, here's all the papers I'm going to refer to. Not only did I write it, I also had them round it so as I was writing, I could just quickly pick up and check. [. . .] it was therapeutic, as I did each piece of flip chart paper. By the end, all the flip chart papers were done, and when I checked through it

was all there. [. . .] And I didn't do the flip charts in order either. I thought let's do my favourite piece, you know, because I don't write in order.

This embodied learning enables Abigail to physically manipulate the assignment writing process, according to her individual preferences, which engenders a sense of ownership and personal order.

6.3.2.4 Creating a personalised temporal space

Time, the lack of it, and the way it impacts and shapes the learning journey, is a significant aspect of the ODE experience. Participants' relationship with time is often described in terms of active negotiation, it is not something learners regard passively; they 'have to create time' (Safi), by making use of otherwise unproductive travelling time, for Lucy it is 'a useful way to use my commute', and Roseanne prefers 'not just to waste it, I just read'. Shona's 'preferred time to study is two o'clock to five o'clock in the morning' when she self-medicates; she takes advantage of being awake and finds 'my brain works then'. Lucy, Shona, Roseanne and Abigail appreciate knowing the programme structure and requirements in advance which allows them to plan and therefore control the time they allocate to different aspects of their life. Safi and Tamac have strict regimes rising at 3 and 4 am in order to study, which enables them to give time to work and family priorities. There is an element of taming time, with the help of tools, for example, Marion uses an app 'because it gave me a set amount of time to be extremely focused [. . .] in a manageable defined time period'; and Sasha's experience is transformed when he starts to use spreadsheets to actively take control of the time he allocates to studying.

For some, the threat of time works to their advantage; when Lucy finds herself between jobs with more time on her hands, she becomes less productive:

I'm finding I'm a worse student than when I had a full-time job because there's no pressure. So, it's kind of like being an undergraduate student again, where you've got all the time in the world to study which means I don't study as much as I should [. . .] I like pressure. I work well under pressure.

Shona has a similar approach:

I need the challenge of knowing that I've got to have it in in 48 hours. At the minute, no, I won't do it because it's too long away. So, if I know I've got to turn it round in 6 hours, I'll turn it round in 6 hours. I can't help it, that's the way I work.

Annie too, recognises the benefits of a degree of external time pressure: 'I'm very much procrastinator. I'm like, yeah, deadlines are important, really, otherwise not much is going to happen'.

6.3.3 Summary

The narratives in this section demonstrate the importance of a relevant and authentic environment, which can deepen and enhance both the learning and the workplace experience. The participants articulate a range of interactions within the academic sphere, in terms of the learning material and one's peers, as well as the socio-cultural sphere, in terms of the workplace and colleagues, and the wider professional or academic community. These narratives indicate that where there is a sense of ownership and responsibility for the learning process, there is more affinity between the learner and their learning, resulting in a more authentic and fulfilling

learning experience. Personal interests and motivations, prior knowledge and experience, and self-belief, or confidence play an important role in terms of engaging from a position of power. Ultimately these are all instances of the educational transaction, in that they are mutual and reciprocal; the stories told here, show that, where the learning is situated in a relevant and supportive socio-cultural context there is little evidence of psychological distance or disconnect.

6.4 Chapter summary

The findings presented in this chapter go some way to addressing the first research question guiding this thesis, that concerning the nature of the interactions engaged in by postgraduate ODLs. Rather than aligning to simplistic typologies of interaction types, the interactions described here are more appropriately categorised according to their function or effect. The first theme, discord and disempowerment, presents narratives which describe professional, social, and academic barriers to full and meaningful engagement with learning. Ultimately, these narratives convey how the discordant situations arose from a denial of the participants' individual agency and preferred roles. The second theme, nourishing and empowering interactions, on the other hand, presents narratives articulating close connections between all aspects of the participants' lives. These interactions are characterised by individual agency, self-awareness and choice by ensuring individually appropriate structures are in place in order to enhance and nourish the learning. Finally, the third theme, situated and self-regulatory interactions, presents narratives which highlight the importance of applied learning with relevance to the professional context, as well as the rewards experienced from mastery of and connection to the learning process itself.

The next chapter will develop the themes presented here further by interpreting the narratives through the theoretical lenses of transactionalism and TTD.

Chapter 7: Discussion

The previous chapter has already begun to address the first of the research questions guiding this study in terms of the nature of ODLs' interactions and the impact of these on their learning experience. This chapter will conceptualise the findings further using the theoretical framework to more comprehensively address the research questions, restated here:

RQ 1. How do postgraduate online distance learners experience the separation between themselves and the academy?

RQ 1.1 What is the nature of online distance learners' interactions within and beyond the study environment?

RQ 1.2 How do interactions within and beyond the study environment impact on the individual learner's experience of the separation between themselves and the academy?

RQ 2. To what extent is the Theory of Transactional Distance a relevant framework through which to conceptualise the online distance learner experience?

The first research question concerns the interactions which ODLs engage in both within and beyond the formal study environment. As seen in the literature review, interaction is an important aspect of contemporary ODE and is invariably designed into programmes in order to pre-empt the potential isolation of this mode of study. The stories shared by the participants did not, however, support the notion of isolation, or the need for supportive interaction with the instructor; their narratives indicated a more complex set of interactional experiences. This can be explained by

reviewing and discussing the findings through the lens of transactionalism, which is the focus of this section.

7.1 ODE is characterised by complex educational transactions not one-dimensional interactions

As indicated in the previous chapter, the interactions engaged in by the participants did not align to Moore's typology, nor to the extended learner-technology, learner-life context, or learner-self interaction types presented in the theoretical framework chapter. Several significant episodes involved multiple types of interaction occurring in a reciprocal process, for example, the interplay between motivations to embark on a programme, the professional context, and ongoing motivation deriving from the personal rewards of developing one's intellect. The interactions presented in the previous chapter are multi-layered, complex and occur across a range of spaces involving an interplay between the individual, their socio-cultural context, the academy as well as their emotional, intellectual and spiritual situations. It is therefore necessary to return to the concept of the non-dualist educational transaction, in which the individual and the environment engage in a mutually transformative encounter (Bandura, 2001). In the context of this thesis, the individual is the ODL, and the environment comprises the formal academic space (the institution, the administrative systems and procedures, the instructor, the subject matter, the co-learners, the tools and resources), the socio-cultural space (the workplace, colleagues, the professional and/or scholarly community, professional roles and responsibilities, family, culture), and the personal space (physical and emotional wellbeing, spirituality, intellectual nourishment,

metacognitive development). The most impactful and valued interactions described by the ODLs in this study are characterised by harmony, or synergy between these spaces. From this perspective, the theory of transactionalism proves useful as it does not seek to fragment interactive experiences, it recognises the holistic or Gestalt nature of the educational transaction. By transcending the fragmentary approach, it is possible to identify two important underlying characteristics of the educational transactions experienced by the participants in this study: synergy and agency. These combine to produce what Bandura terms 'agentic transactions' and will be discussed next.

7.2 Synergistic transactions

The discordant and disempowering interactions, which comprise the first functional category in the findings chapter, and which result from an absence of synergy, are in many cases resolved or avoided when the learners experience more harmonious encounters inhabiting the intersections between academic, personal and professional life. Roseanne's narrative, which regularly describes her joy and deep learning experiences, consists of interactions between her prior experience, which gives her the confidence, motivation and reassurance, her homelife, which is interested and supportive, the learning content, which she finds inherently interesting and which relates to her professional role, her interactions with co-learners, and the wider professional/academic community through her attendance at conferences, and the reward, which she reaps and feeds back into the process. Abigail's positive experience relates to the reciprocity between her professional role, the interest and support of colleagues, the caring interactions with the tutor, her

motivation and enjoyment of the learning process, tangible results following the challenging module, a supportive home environment. The total immersion described by Fred means he is constantly engaged in an educational transaction involving his study, his professional life, his reflections and his interactions with Evernote, which are all aspects of a mutually constructive process occurring within the space enabled by his family and workplace. Roseanne and Fred's deeply reflective experiences are reminiscent of the 'internalized conversation' (Holmberg, 1995, p. 48). None of these aspects of the educational transaction can be separated out and identified as a type of interaction in itself, the aspects interrelate and culminate in an experience which is greater than the sum of its parts.

Indeed, the stories in this study tell of various Gestalt type transactions, rather than simplistic one-dimensional interactions between two phenomena. While this was not Moore's intention, the resultant typology and research based on it tends to oversimplify interaction. The theoretical framework chapter shows how studies often attempt to deconstruct or fragment the interactive elements of the ODE experience in order to examine each part with the aim of maximising that which is found to engender most achievement and satisfaction. This approach overlooks the multi-faceted interplay of interactions co-occurring within and beyond that which is measurable and quantifiable from VLE data and quantitative scales. It does not account for the realities of ODLs' lives beyond the academic structures and the valuable and necessary transactions happening in these spaces. This is seen in Marion's experience; her programme has targeted designed interaction treatments (Borokhovski et al., 2012) involving peers and tutors, groupwork, and self-paced

engaging content, with multiple opportunities for individual tutor feedback. So, while all the ingredients seem to be present in terms of interaction types, which has been found to increase cognitive engagement (Bernard et al., 2009), Marion's journey through her ODE programme is a discordant one. The discord is due to her professional context, which is not in harmony with her learning, the content is not something which can be immediately implemented in her work, her colleagues are uninterested, even disparaging, and the workload is prohibitive. The resultant stress, and failure, (Marion had to retake a module) is not an ideal learning experience.

7.3 Agentic transactions

Having discussed the significance of harmonious interactions, or synergistic transactions, the discussion will now move on to agentic transactions, in which personal agency, self-belief and collective agency are important dimensions.

7.3.1 'I like to do it my way': Personal agency

A prominent feature of the participants' narratives of these transactions, is that of control, or personal agency, in this way, they can be described as 'agentic transactions' where 'personal agency and social structure operate interdependently' (Bandura, 2001, p. 15). The narratives often recount situations in which the individual exerted control over their learning process for example Annie's mix and match approach, Shona's trip to London, Colette's choice of who to interact with. Where they were not in control, participants either manipulated the situation in order to steer it in a more beneficial direction, for example Fred adopted a different role in the discussion forums, Sasha's decision to use tools to manage his learning; or

sought alternative ways to regain or reassert their agency: Annie regained the upper hand by producing a strong reflective piece, Abigail and her peers' rebellion. In Bandura's words, they 'operate[d] generatively and proactively, not just reactively, to shape the character of their social systems' (2001, p. 15). These experiences also align to Dron's (2005) theory of transactional control in that the individuals make choices about their responses to situations.

The transactions described by the participants illustrate Bandura's (1999, 2001) selective, constructed, and imposed environmental structures, within which individuals operate to exert personal agency. These structures require differing levels of agency with the imposed structure requiring the least and constructed, the most. Although the participants are learning within the imposed environmental structure of the institution, they are able to exert a degree of agency over their selection of activities, pace of learning and style of engagement. So, the ODLs in this study often mould their environments to construct a more fulfilling learning situation, which is articulated in terms of closeness, immersion, or being in command of the learning process. For example, Roseanne's narrative of no sacrifice, Fred's use of Evernote, Abigail's flipchart strategy. There are differing types of immersion, however, where Roseanne and Fred purposefully do not demarcate between their personal, professional and learning spaces, Sasha needs to periodically distance himself from cerebral activity by travelling and visiting different places. Nonetheless, all approaches are grounded in positions of ownership and control of the various environments which the participants manipulate to achieve harmony.

The enabling and empowering interactions comprising health and wellbeing pursuits, spirituality, and reflection arise from intimate individual spaces, which the participants actively create, and which enhance their learning. The non-academic interpersonal, particularly, family relationships described by the participants illustrate the vital role these play in their journey. Not only do these provide emotional support in the form of encouragement (Sasha), they are enabling and empowering (Abigail, Fred), and they complement the learning (Roseanne). As highlighted in the literature review, these personal spaces rarely feature in the ODE interaction research, and yet they constitute vital sources of enrichment for these learners and help to create the spaces in which the educational transaction occurs.

The selection and creation of environmental structures indicates that the agentic transactions occur when there is a degree of harmony within and mastery over the situation, when there is a degree of psychological proximity between the individual and the educational process. In other words, TD, in the sense of the psychological separation between learner and their learning, is low. When this occurs, the participants' narratives do not convey any sense of separation between themselves and the academy, they are immersed, yet in control; the academy and instructor become less significant, there is a sense of harmony between the individual and their journey.

The situated and metacognitive interactions are consistent with Watson's (2013) types of life-context interactions, which are all located within the professional sphere. Safi's work environment provides specific academic-related support aligning

to the first two of Watson's categorisations: help with assignments and help understanding content. This also echoes Ferguson's (2010) observation that vocationally focussed ODLs often seek informal mentoring relationships with individuals in their workplace. Abigail and Lucy's expertise is valued and sought out by colleagues and thus reflects Watson's (2013) categories three and four: discussing application of content to real world, and sharing knowledge. Roseanne and Annie's conference attendance also provides the opportunity to discuss real world applications (or bemoan the absence of such). K. Lee's (2018) double-layered community of practice model, which highlights the importance of authentic interactions for the social learning experience, is also reflected in these narratives. Where it is lacking in Annie's professional context, she actively seeks out a professional community in the conference circuit, thus adding weight to Lee's point that 'each student is the agent of the development process of their professional CoP' (2018, p. 1266). Marion, on the other hand, has recourse to none of these life context interactions, she is alone with the learning content. This results in a less than positive experience for Marion, while the synergies enjoyed by Abigail, Lucy, Roseanne and Safi, and to a lesser extent, Annie, combine to create a heightened educational transaction. These findings offer further insights to Watson's conclusions, in providing the counter perspective, that of an absence of such life context interactions. So, these professional interactions provide synergies with the learning content interactions to enhance not only the learner's experience but also their wider socio-cultural environment.

These transactions are thus suggestive of a multi-layered collection of interactions between the learner, their learning, and the professional community, which provide a foundation to sustain the individual's learning structures. To echo Gibson, 'teachers surround the learner. . . . We need to empower the learner to assess their context for resources and to seek out those resources as another source of help' (1998, pp. 122-123 as cited in Watson, 2013, p. 185). They also align closely to Dron's (2019) notions of independent learning being fully situated in the people and objects surrounding the learner.

Several transactions conveyed through the participants' narratives are those concerned with created environmental structures (Bandura, 2008). These created environments may be physical or technological structures which individuals construct in order to impose a degree of control and order, for example Safi and Tamac's strict time-management regimes, Roseanne's diet plan, and Sasha's travelling. The created environment may also comprise social milieus, such as Roseanne and Annie's conference attendance, Colette's 'little circle', and Safi's workplace study sessions. In some cases, these created environments go further than enabling personal agency over events, they nourish, sustain and enrich the individual's experience. There are similarities here between much of the SRL literature and the accounts of my participants including the cognitive and metacognitive skills, interaction abilities and management skills of Hong and Jung's (2011) ODL competencies. However, what is unique in my participants' narratives, is the blurring or merging of the academic, professional and personal spheres, whereas the SRL literature tends to reside solely within the academic sphere. Indeed,

although all the participants achieve success in the sense of passing module assignments, summative exams and completing the programme, the nature of their individual successes is more nuanced. For Sasha, his biggest achievement appears to be metacognitive 'evolution', Lucy's sense of achievement arises from being able 'to prove to myself that I'm still smart', Roseanne clearly values the journey over the final outcome, and a significant moment for Abigail is when she sees that 'the learning has come through' from the challenging module. Although Marion's journey is successful from an institutional perspective, (she finishes the course and achieves the qualification), her experience lacks the triumphs and achievements described by others, whose successes are more akin to Subotzky and Prinsloo's (2011) learner-centred definition of success.

7.3.2 'Even I didn't post': Self-belief as a precursor to personal agency

According to Bandura, 'self-efficacy is the foundation of human agency' (1999, p. 28), it was established in the literature chapters that self-efficacy can be understood as self-belief, and without this, people are not able to exercise control or agency in a situation. Without agency, there cannot be reciprocal transactions. Strong self-belief enables the individual to exert personal agency in order to select and construct beneficial environmental structures, whereas weaker self-efficacy beliefs result in the individual having less influence over their environment. This may explain Tamac and Lucy's reluctance to take a more proactive approach to the discussion forums; their lack of conviction in the styles and validity of their contributions is indicative of weaker self-beliefs. They therefore do not have recourse to the personal agency needed to influence the environment, they adopt a more reactive, even passive role,

which leads to a rejection of or distancing from the learning process. However, Lucy's narrative goes on to reassert some control over the situation, when she adopts a more strategic approach to the discussions. Lucy's story is an interesting illustration of the interplay between the individual, the environment and behaviours which constitute the model of triadic reciprocal causation (Bandura, 1999, 2008). Triadic reciprocal causation is a transaction 'in which personal factors in the form of cognitive, affective and biological events, behavioural patterns, and environmental events all operate as interacting determinants that influence one another bi-directionally' (Bandura, 1999, p. 21). It offers a way to conceptualise the interplay between the aspects of the educational transaction. Figure 7.1 represents how this played out for Lucy as she describes in narrative 20. While the final outcome of this transaction, is a distanced, superficial engagement, it is ultimately an agentic transaction as Lucy maintains some influence over the situation and is proactive in her response to it. It falls short of being a synergistic, or harmonious outcome, however and does not lead to a transformative learning experience. It is, nonetheless, aligned to Lucy's motivations to achieve high grades, which in turn contributes to her self-belief (see her profile in chapter 5).

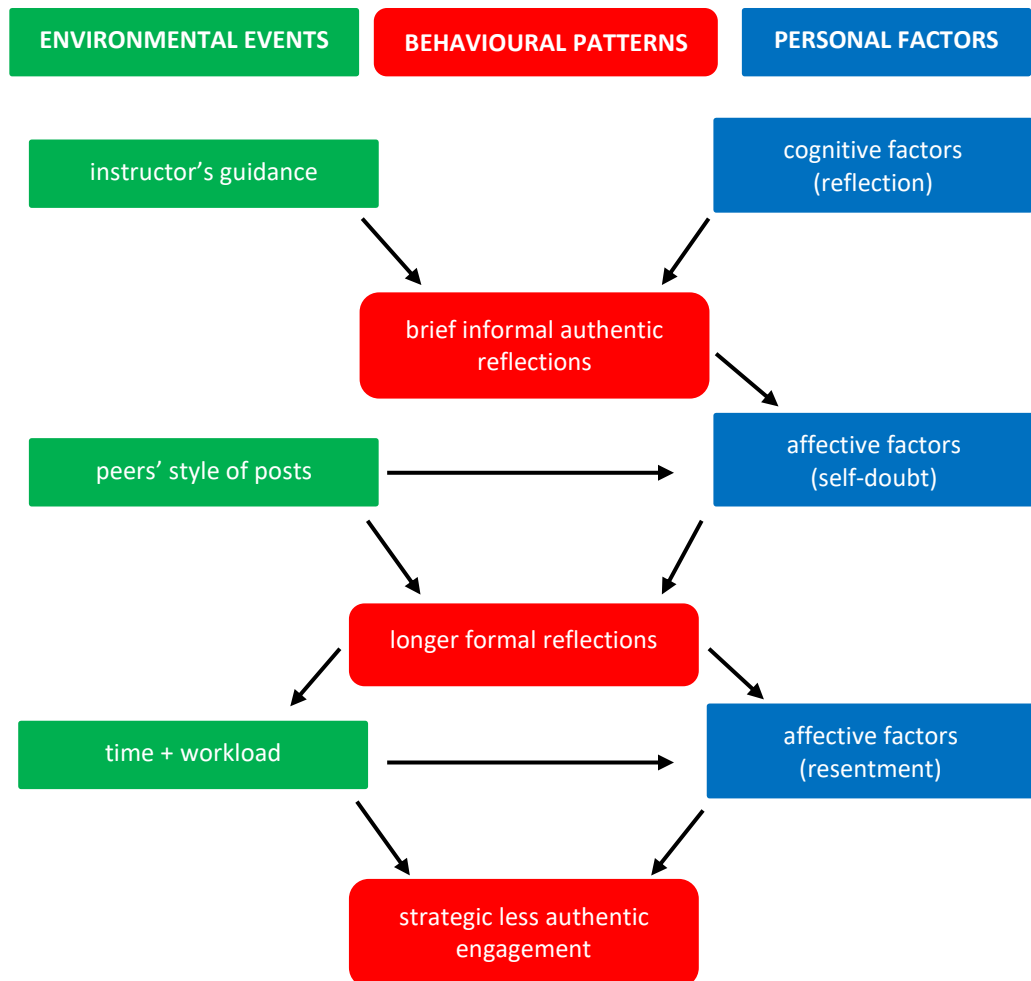


Figure 7.1 Lucy's narrative represented as triadic reciprocal causation

Several of the participants' stories tell of meeting and surmounting obstacles or challenges, for example, Sasha's sense of achievement upon overcoming his initial struggles, Annie's ultimate victory over the 'control freak', Abigail's study buddy episode, and Shona's mastery over the technology. These accounts are illustrative of the idea that self-belief is strengthened through encountering and overcoming difficulties (Bandura, 1989). Shona, in particular, appears to have some awareness of this as she actively seeks out challenging situations in order to occupy her mind through gaining mastery over the activities she engages in; once mastered, they no longer hold interest for her. While it is not possible to assess the impact of the challenges undergone by Marion on her self-beliefs, it may be reasoned that these

were already strong in view of her ability to persist through the difficulties she encountered (Jan, 2015; W. A. Zimmerman & Kulikowich, 2016). In fact, Marion's narrative demonstrates high levels of resilience and persistence despite not being in a position to make use of institutional support or strongly identifying as a student, which is in contrast to previous research highlighting the links between student identity, motivation and resilience (Baxter, 2012). Although Marion suggests economics was a strong motivation having paid course fees in advance, her professional role may offer additional explanation for her persistence. As a surgeon, Marion may be assumed to have a 'strong working [identity]' and high 'levels of professional resilience' (Baxter, 2010a, 2011; Reeve, 1992, as cited in Baxter, 2012, p. 110) which have been suggested to impact on an individual's endeavours beyond the professional environment (Baxter, 2012).

7.3.3 'The power of the group is really helpful': Collective agency

Personal agency is not necessarily an individualistic concept (Bandura, 2001), in several narratives, participants draw strength from constructive relationships. There are two strong relationships described in Annie's 'control freak' narrative, one negative and disempowering, the other positive and supportive. The structure of the episode, which culminates in a team victory in Annie's eyes, 'in the end we got better marks than they got', arguably suggests that the first relationship serves to strengthen the second. Similarly, Abigail together with her more like-minded peers felt able to overrule the imposed structure and exercise a degree of agency and control in their choice of collaborators which 'worked better'. Colette too, structures her social interactions according to those she feels empathy with and excludes 'the

people that write loads of stuff and try and sound clever', whom she feels no kinship with, from her 'little circle'. The relationships described here reflect the inconclusive findings of research reviewed in earlier chapters investigating LLI types and how they are experienced by ODLs. All three encounter peers with whom there is no synergy, or worse cause distress, yet all three, perhaps as a result of the former, actively seek out more nourishing alliances. These alliances are reflective of 'collective agency' in which 'collective action' is grounded in 'a belief in the power to make things happen' (Bandura, 1999, p. 33).

7.3.4 Summary

Reconceptualising ODE interactions as agentic transactions expands on the existing quantitative measures of interaction in ODE reviewed in the literature chapter, by highlighting the importance of synergistic transactions between the individual and their multiple environments for a harmonious learning experience. Viewed through the lens of transactionalism, the analysis of rich qualitative narratives provides deeper insights into the participants' educational transactions, which culminate from the synergies between individual agency and surrounding environmental structures. The narratives also reveal how, when there is synergy and harmony between spheres constituting the individual and their environment, the educational transaction is characterised by a closeness or psychological proximity. This suggests that the separation between the ODL and the academy is much less significant when the learner is able to exercise agency to effect a harmonious learning encounter, or educational transaction. That these synergies and harmonies arise from a non-individualistic personal agency, echoes Garrison's (1989) tripartite model of control

and Dron's (2005) notion of transactional control, whereby independence and agency are entirely situated in and reliant on the social context.

Having addressed the first research questions, the next section concerns the second, that of re-examining TTD.

7.4 Re-examining transactional distance

I have already suggested in the theoretical framework chapter that a useful way to interpret the concept of TD is to view it as the psychological separation or disconnect between the learner and their learning experience. This adopts a broader interpretation than Moore's (1993) original definition as the communications gap between learner and instructor. I suggest a redefinition of instructor as the wider academic, social and personal environments with which the learner engages in the educational transaction. This section will further develop Moore's theory in view of the realities of the ODLs in the current study. I propose that TTD might be updated and expanded to be more grounded in contemporary ODLs' experiences, whose realities transcend deficit perspectives, and who play a central and active role in shaping their learning. First, I address each of the elements of TTD: dialogue, autonomy, and structure and recast these from the perspective of the agentic learner with reference to the stories told by the participants encompassing the multiple environments they create and occupy. Following this, I argue that TTD is grounded in a deficit model of DE, which does not accurately reflect the lived experiences of the ODLs in this study.

7.4.1 Instructivist and constructivist dialogue

While Keegan and Garrison acknowledge inter-learner communication, conversations around DE at that time were often grounded in LII. The term distance *education* compounds this perspective and, while interaction is widely acknowledged as a vital component of the educational experience, Garrison interprets it as that between student and teacher, ‘the overriding impact on the quality of an educational experience is the provision of sustained discourse between teacher and student’ (Garrison, 1993, p. 11).

The term distance *education* itself belies a teacher centric perspective and today is often replaced by distance *learning*, particularly in the UK context. This indicates a shift towards more learner-centred approaches, which have been facilitated by a wider range of interactive technologies than were available at the time Keegan, Garrison and Moore were writing. However, even in more recent publications, Moore (2019, p. 34) remains focussed on the learner-teacher dynamic:

transactional distance is the gap between the understanding of a teacher (or teaching team) and that of a learner, and distance education is the methodology of structuring courses and managing dialogue between teacher and learner to bridge that gap through communications technology.

This is particularly apparent in his thinking around dialogue, which he defines as ‘a particular kind of interpersonal interaction, and it happens after a course is designed, as teachers exchange words and other symbols with learners, aimed at the latter’s creation of knowledge’ (M.G. Moore, 2013, p. 70). Although this definition is more aligned to a constructivist perspective on learning than his earlier terminology,

‘instructional dialogue’ (M. G. Moore, 1993, p. 23), it remains a teacher-student relationship. Moore’s conception of dialogue, is that of a hierarchical, didactic, scaffolding type of interaction, ‘that occur[s] when one gives instruction and the others respond’ (M. G. Moore, 1993, pp. 23-24). Although he recognises the value of a more egalitarian dialogue in which knowledge is co-constructed between teacher and learner (M. G. Moore, 1993, pp. 29-30) and between learner and learner (M. G. Moore, 1993, p. 33), his claim that ‘highly autonomous learners are able to cope with a lower degree of dialogue but less autonomous learners need a relatively high degree of dialogue’ (M. G. Moore, 2013, p. 71) indicates that ultimately, dialogue is perceived as a supportive mechanism to help those in need, rather than as an intellectual exchange.

These moves between perceptions and functions of dialogue suggest that a reconceptualisation of dialogue recognising its dual purpose might be useful. Indeed, this has been suggested by Shearer and Park (2019), where dialogue performs a negotiating and a knowledge building function. The narratives in this study, were not suggestive of the negotiating function of dialogue, however, they did indicate two distinct forms of dialogue; one being the instructional didactic dialogue, which functions to support learners; and one being an egalitarian intellectual exchange of views which functions to deepen understanding and co-construct learning between learners. I will refer to these as instructivist dialogue and constructivist dialogue respectively. The latter being consistent with the literature affirming the importance of interaction as a means to co-construct knowledge.

Illustrations of the supportive function of instructivist dialogue can be seen in Abigail's narrative of the two tutors in which she expresses a strong appreciation for the more caring approach of the second tutor. Although even this, is more aligned to the emotional rather than the academic. In terms of the didactic function of dialogue, several participants opine that learning can be usefully mediated by the instructor's presence during live synchronous events or recorded lectures (Roseanne, Safi, Tamac), although these are hypothetical notions rather than lived experience. Fred's narrative, on the other hand, characterised as it is by a striving for critical dialogue, illustrates the importance of the egalitarian intellectual exchange of views, or constructivist dialogue, seen in the literature chapter, which functions to deepen understanding and co-construct learning between confident learners. Furthermore, the programme structure, which, according to Moore, suits autonomous learners, actually prevents Fred's autonomy by constraining his need to discuss the issues in depth. Roseanne and Annie's conference attendance show this co-construction of learning can transcend the institutional boundaries and further supports Gibson's (1998 as cited in Watson, 2013) notion that the instructor function is not limited to the institutionally-based individual who structures the teaching programme (M. G. Moore, 1993).

Co-construction of knowledge between learners is a further example of constructivist dialogue and is highly valued and empowering as we saw in Abigail's study buddy episode, Colette's 'little circle', Sasha's appreciation of the group task as well as all the participants' acknowledgement of the benefits of reflective and sharing dialogue with peers. As argued earlier in this chapter, collective agency is an

important aspect of agentic transactions, and that agentic transactions are characterised by synergy and harmony and proximity to one's learning. Here I propose that collective agency is enacted through constructivist dialogue, therefore, constructivist dialogue contributes to agency and reduces TD, or separation from one's learning. This relationship is illustrated in Figure 7.1, which is a re-modelling of Moore's original illustration (Figure 3.2).

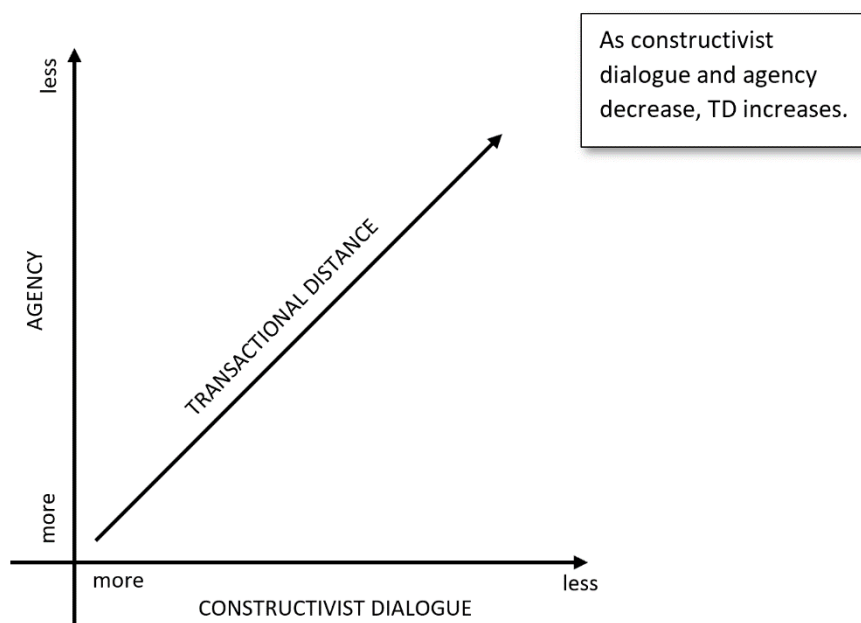


Figure 7.1 Relationship between constructivist dialogue, agency and TD

7.4.2 Required and permitted learner autonomy

The didactic quality of Moore's original theory is further illustrated through the element of learner autonomy. As with the element of dialogue, Moore's writings on learner autonomy include two subtly different standpoints: required autonomy and permitted autonomy. The former refers to the independence and self-sufficiency that is required of learners as a result of minimal instructional dialogue and inflexible structure; the latter refers to the agency or control afforded the learner over the learning process in order to 'define his [sic] own goals and problems, and to evaluate

his [*sic*] progress' (M. G. Moore, 1972, p. 81). Moore acknowledges that agency or control over the learning process is rare and the most common situation is that where the institution or teacher decides the curriculum without minimal learner input (M. G. Moore, 1972, p. 81).

The distinction between these two aspects of learner autonomy is subtle and requires further explication. The self-sufficiency, independent form of autonomy is perhaps more effectively defined by contrast to its opposite, dependency. In this respect, non-autonomous, or dependent learners are those who require instructional guidance, scaffolding and support. They are perhaps lacking in confidence and less familiar with independent learning situations. Clearly, this type of learner will face more obstacles in a DE programme, where the guidance is less immediate. In this way, DE programmes with less instructional dialogue, *require* learners to be self-sufficient and independent; those who are not, will struggle; it is a sink or swim situation. Those learners who have developed independent learning skills, on the other hand, are more likely to manage without instructional dialogue and therefore succeed in DE. The participants in the current study, largely demonstrate strong self-beliefs, they are self-directed and can function and progress largely independently of instructor guidance.

The agency form of autonomy can be characterised by choice or control and relates to Moore's typology of autonomy (M. G. Moore, 1973, p. 673), where the locus of control is with the learner regarding decisions around the learning process. This type of autonomy requires a flexible programme design, which allows the learner to make

choices regarding their learning journey. In this way, it relates closely to programme structure, the more rigid the structure, the less learner choice is possible (although, according to Moore, the more self-belief is required, discussed next).

Both types of learner autonomy are evident in the contrasting narratives of Tamac and Fred. According to Moore, the reduction of structure accompanied by more opportunities for dialogue should decrease TD. However, although in Tamac's case, the peer dialogue is not subject to any structure or guidance in the form of instructional dialogue, the opportunity is not embraced by Tamac or her peers. This reflects claims that, for quality interaction to occur, opportunity is not enough in itself (Borokhovski et al., 2012; Oyarzun et al., 2018). It would take a particularly motivated and confident learner with something worthwhile to say, to make use of this optional forum. Although this lack of guidance has a different outcome from the chaotic forums of Shona's narrative, the ultimate effect is the same, it creates a barrier to meaningful communication and increases TD. This serves to corroborate the need to consider autonomy as twofold, as autonomy in terms of individual agency is potentially high here, but self-belief is low, illustrating how self-belief is a pre-cursor to personal agency. Here, we see support for claims around the centrality of control (Dron, 2005) and self-regulation in the ODE experience (Andrade, 2015).

In contrast, Moore's learner autonomy, which denotes learner control over the learning process, fails to account for Fred's high autonomy in terms of independent learning (self-belief), but low autonomy in terms of control over the systems, procedures and how he engages in his learning journey (agency). Moore describes

the 'ideal fully autonomous learner' as 'emotionally independent of an instructor' and "'Can approach subject matter directly" (Boyd, 1966)' (M. G. Moore, 1993, p. 31). While Fred is certainly emotionally independent and fully capable of approaching the content directly, there comes a point when there is need for social interaction in order to progress. Fred lacks a 'more knowledgeable other' (Vygotsky, 1986) to help him across the Zone of Proximal Development, instead he moves towards becoming the more knowledgeable other for his peers and ultimately himself. Roles, identities and therefore true learning are being constrained in this example, by the structure of the forums, which are on the face of it intended 'to enable dialogue and exchange' but which, in Fred's reality, function to prevent this. Again, this provides support for the importance of social knowledge construction and the role of the community as contributors to agency and independent learning, that we saw in the interaction literature. Furthermore, it highlights the inadequacies of the reductionist self-efficacy and SRL quantitative measures seen in the literature regarding ODL characteristics.

It is important to note that Moore, himself, does not explicitly distinguish between these two forms of autonomy, although both can be discerned in his writing. He conceives of highly structured programmes as having few opportunities for dialogue and therefore high TD and so require a higher degree of required autonomy (M. G. Moore, 1993, p. 27). This is also presented in a positive light, in that the distance creates autonomous learners (M. G. Moore, 1973, p. 670) and he talks of the desirability of this citing Rogers' learning to learn, Thelen's 'captaincy of self' and Bruner's 'self-sufficiency' (pp.668-669). That autonomy is desirable is stated clearly

at the outset of his theory of independent learning and teaching: 'That each scholar can and should pursue knowledge in his [*sic*] own idiosyncratic fashion is a fundamental assumption of the university and one of its most ancient traditions' (M. G. Moore, 1973, p. 661). While he discusses in depth the individual agency aspect of autonomy and assesses independent study programmes on this basis in his 1972 and 1973 works, his theory ultimately reverts back to the self-belief aspect of autonomy in his claims that DE programmes, due to the scant instructional dialogue 'are naturally suited to the autonomous learner' (M. G. Moore, 1972, p. 84).

7.4.3 Structure: clarity and constraint

The close interrelationship of the three elements of Moore's TTD presents a challenge when attempting to discuss each one individually. We have already seen how structure is integral to autonomy and dialogue, what remains is to examine structure from the perspective of the participants' realities. As already stated, Moore's conception of structure refers to the relative 'rigidity or flexibility of the programme's educational objectives, teaching strategies, and evaluation methods' (M. G. Moore, 1993, p. 26). The implication of this is that a tightly structured programme requires a higher degree of required autonomy as there is less room for supportive instructional dialogue and personalisation. As with dialogue and autonomy, structure is explicitly conceived as a singular, constraining factor. However, this fails to take account of the positive qualities of structure such as logic, clarity and order, which arguably enable learners to be autonomous, while supporting more dependent learners. Shona's description of the discussion forums in which she complains 'the stuff wasn't logical' illustrates the need for structure in the

sense of order. The apparently high volume of communication here has the opposite effect to what was intended, at least for Shona, who does not feel connected or engaged, the perceived chaos creates a barrier, the noise of the forum prevents any real dialogue. The structure of this activity is low and although the quantity of (peer) dialogue is high, the implication is that the quality is poor, so while autonomy is potentially high due the absence of structure, the motivation to use it is low due to the lack of clarity. Where Moore's formula decrees less structure allows more dialogue, we see the opposite in this narrative, which highlights a limitation of Moore's singular interpretation of structure as constraint and inflexibility. A more helpful structure characterised by orderliness and clarity is what is required here to allow Shona to exercise her agency and participate in the dialogue. Shona's later narrative recounting her experience of not being able to contribute to the time-constrained group task is more akin to Moore's meaning of structure in that the more rigid the programme structure, the less 'responsive to each learner's individual needs' (M. G. Moore, 1993, p. 26). In both examples, Shona is prevented from fully engaging as a result of structure, in the former, it is too little structure, while in the latter it is too much.

Returning to the relationship between dialogue, autonomy, and structure, Figure 7.2 is a reworking of Moore's original visual representation of the relationship between dialogue, structure and autonomy (see Figure 3.3). Moore's formula states that DE programmes tend towards a more rigidly structured design, offer fewer opportunities for instructional (instructivist) dialogue and therefore require self-efficacious autonomous learners. However, according to the findings of this study,

while self-efficacious autonomous learners may not require instructivist dialogue, they do require and desire constructivist dialogue. By focussing solely on the instructivist perspective, designers basing their programmes on Moore’s theory, may seek to provide increased opportunities for instructivist dialogue to support non-autonomous learners, while neglecting to provide constructivist dialogic opportunities for autonomous learners. Similarly, programme designers may assume that increased structure may not be a problem for autonomous learners, as Moore’s theory suggests, but as the participants’ experiences show, such programmes would frustrate autonomous learners wishing to exercise individual agency. Finally, it is necessary to be mindful of the need for structure in the sense of order and clarity to enable both autonomous and dependent learners to engage meaningfully, plan ahead and avoid confusion.

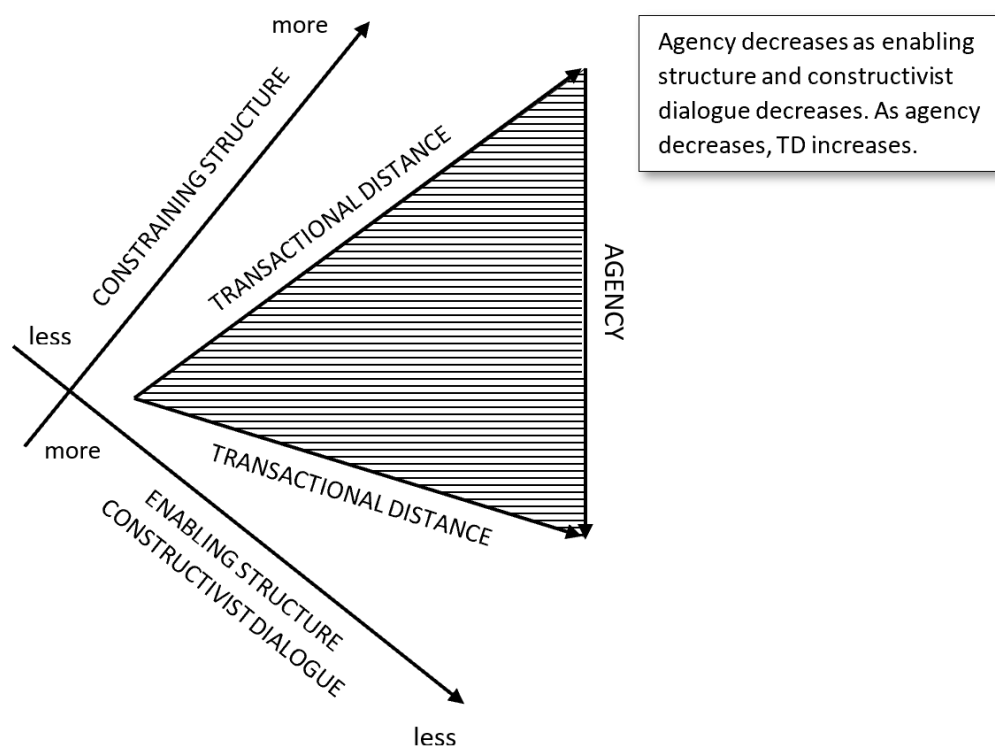


Figure 7.2 Revised model of TD

7.4.4 Refuting the deficit model

DE is often characterised solely by the problem of distance between instructor and student and the need for mediated interaction. This is generally perceived as an inferior experience when compared to face-to-face education:

Teaching at a distance is characterized by the separation of teacher and learner and of the learner from the learning group, with the interpersonal face-to-face communication of conventional education being replaced by an apersonal mode of communication mediated by technology (Keegan, 1996, p. 8)

The term 'distance' itself is problematic and furthers the deficit perspective; synonyms and connotations are negative and portray an undesirable situation: coldness, detachment, apartness, separation, gap, barrier, void, something to be crossed, overcome. Keegan's choice of language: 'separation', 'apersonal' and the unfavourable comparison with 'conventional education' highlights the deficit perspective:

a form of education which purports to make available a parallel provision of education, equal in quality and status, to that of conventional schools, colleges, universities, while abandoning the need for face-to-face communication in the learning group, previously thought to be a cultural imperative for all education (Keegan, 1993, pp. 1-2)

His use of emotive language, 'purports', 'abandoning', foregrounds the undesirable negative elements of DE and positions it at a disadvantage, needing parity with conventional education, which is implied to be inherently of a high quality and

enjoying a certain status. It is also assumed that classroom-based education entails useful face-to-face communication; while it may well facilitate interaction between those physically present together, there is no guarantee that this is meaningful or useful. For example, very little meaningful interaction occurs in 'conventional' lecture theatres with hundreds of students listening passively to a lecturer. Keegan's purpose is to highlight and problematise this view, however, and he notes further challenges faced by DE, such as the industrialisation and neo-liberal associations (Keegan, 1993, p. 2).

Garrison (1989, 1993) adopts a more positive tone with his definition of DE which focuses on the fact that communication is mediated, although he too favours comparison with face-to-face contexts by seeking to minimise this, 'the only real difference [between distance and conventional education] is that the majority of communication between teacher and student is mediated' (Garrison, 1993, p. 9). This characterisation fails to acknowledge the differences in learning environment, socio-cultural context, motivations, access to resources, beliefs and expectations about education, which are all mediators of the educational transaction (M. G. Moore, 2013) and which are arguably more varied in non-contiguous education. Furthermore, this statement implies that face-to-face communication is not mediated, whereas I argue that communication is mediated in contiguous learning situations by a range of socio-cultural, emotional and pedagogic factors, so all communication is mediated to some extent. It would seem that Garrison is focussing purely on the physical here and seeking to play down other differences, perhaps in an attempt to counter the deficit critique of DE. However, in doing so, he risks

oversimplification of the complexities of both types of education, which he recognises can become unhelpful, 'the problem is that distinguishing characteristics of distance education too often overemphasize the separation of teacher and student' (Garrison, 1993, p. 13).

The preoccupation with the teacher-learner relationship of TTD, is not widely reflected in the narratives of this study. Chetna, Safi and Tamac initially indicate that they find classroom-based learning preferable in terms of understanding content and communicating directly with tutors. However, closer questioning reveals that these opinions are based on familiarity (Chetna), multi-modality (Safi) and reassurance (Tamac) rather than any inherent superiority of in-person education. Tamac's 'studying alone' episode is the only classic illustration of Moore's original notion of how the physical separation of instructor and student results in 'a communications gap and space of potential misunderstanding' (Moore, 1993); or at least this is how Tamac perceives the situation. There is a suggestion here that physical proximity with the instructor facilitates understanding, 'when I sit in class, I could, you know, get the concepts better'. This indicates Tamac's view of instructional dialogue is in line with Moore's and her need for this suggests she is not yet an independent, self-reliant autonomous learner. Safi's desire to 'get the correct information' by attending the live synchronous tutor-led sessions, suggests that without this direct connection to the instructor, Safi may experience TD. However, on closer inspection, as well as Safi's own interpretation, this episode is more concerned with the usefulness of this supplementary mode of communication, as an

aid to her independent learning along with the socially constructive experiences she gets from the study group.

Other narratives which recount elements of the learner-teacher relationship are less aligned to the TTD teacher-learner separation. Abigail's depiction of her 'very giving' tutor, contrary to TTD, is characterised by strong personal connections. Fred, Chetna and Lucy all recount feeling constrained by their instructor practices, although these are closely bound up with programme and institutional structures and systems as well as the nature and purpose of the discussion forum interface.

Generally, the episodes relating transactions defined by a communications gap between learner and teacher are in the minority, the overall impression of the narratives is the range of rich, meaningful and transformative experiences arising from the agentic transactions and a broader understanding of instructor.

Nonetheless, it is this separation that provides the basis for TTD, which began as a theory of independent learning: 'independent Learning and Teaching is an educational system in which the learner is autonomous, and separated from his [*sic*] teacher by space and time' (M. G. Moore, 1973, p. 663). Moore makes similar assumptions to Keegan about face-to-face, which he terms contiguous, learning environments, claiming that 'there is immediate, spontaneous, often emotionally motivated interaction between learner and teacher, and, usually between the learner and other learners' (M. G. Moore, 1973, p. 664). This is closer to an ideal rather than the reality of a classroom or lecture theatre, particularly at the time of writing, and Moore does acknowledge that this is an unchallenged assumption.

So far, I have shown how attempts to theorise DE tend to have as their basis, an unfavourable comparison to face-to-face education. More recently, however, there is recognition of the unhelpfulness of this stance and there are calls to move beyond it and to examine DE in its own right (Abrami et al., 2011). Nevertheless, the deficit view and assumption that face-to-face is preferable persists in DE scholarship, for example Webster and Whitworth's (2017) desire to 'bring distance learners as far as possible into the on-campus community' (p.72).

It is clear from the participants' narratives in this study that it would be inaccurate to characterise their experiences as inherently lesser or inferior simply as a result of the distance. Although most participants acknowledge the fact that they do not have the direct social connections associated with face-to-face learning, the significant episodes, on the whole, do not indicate that this is a defining feature of their learning. There is only one episode, that of Tamac and her reluctance to actively participate in the discussion forum, where TD is a direct consequence of the DE environment. Generally, the narratives are replete with rich, complex and fulfilling transactions, which for some at least, are facilitated by the distance aspect. Where participants do experience psychological distance, this is a result of the absence of a relevant and supportive professional context (Marion), restrictive institutional structures (Fred, Shona, Lucy, Chetna), problematic collaborative partnerships (Annie, Abigail) and stresses and strains caused by the pressures of life (Tamac, Marion).

7.4.5 Summary: Transactional distance from a learner perspective

As shown in the preceding sections, TTD is premised on an instructional perspective. TD refers to the distance in understanding between instructor and learner and is determined and controlled by the decisions made by the academy. Dialogue is largely interpreted as instructional; structure is that decided by the academy; and autonomy is enabled, required or restricted by the academy. Conceptions of dialogue, structure and autonomy in TTD are singular, foregrounding the constraining elements that are instructivism, inflexibility and required autonomy, and overlooking the enabling elements that are constructivism, order and agency. This has the effect of presenting DE from a deficit perspective, as an activity starting with the handicap of separation and needing to strive for parity with the proximity of face-to-face education. It also risks neglecting individual learners' needs and preferences.

An alternative approach is to proceed from a learner perspective by placing learners and their lived experiences centrally in order to understand their realities. These realities can help ODE programme designers draw conclusions about TD and use these as a basis for pedagogic and design decisions. In doing this, my study has revealed alternative conceptions of the three elements of Moore's original theory, which are grounded in ODLs' realities, and which complement and enhance TTD.

Having discussed the findings through the theoretical lenses, and addressed the research questions, the next chapter will conclude the whole thesis by summarising the key take-aways and considering how the work done in this thesis might contribute to current understandings and future investigations of ODLs.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

This chapter provides a summary of the key findings of the study with reference to the original purpose and aims of the thesis. It highlights the original contributions the study makes to the knowledge base of ODE in terms of theory, practitioner implications, and institutional policy and strategy. I also consider limitations of the research design and conclusions drawn with a view to identifying potential areas of interest for further research which can build on this thesis.

8.1 Summary of key findings

The premise for this thesis is the disconnect between the growth of ODE HE provision, gaps in knowledge of ODLs' realities, assumptions around interaction in ODE, and the lack of an up to date theory of DE. I argued that these disconnects result in misunderstandings about who ODLs are and the unique needs they have, inappropriate programme design, and the unhelpful application of historic systems and procedures designed with traditional full-time on-campus students in mind. I set out to address these disconnects by exploring the lived experiences of a group of 12 postgraduate ODLs. I aimed to illuminate the interactions they engaged in both within and beyond their student lives and to determine how these interactions impact their experience of the separation of DE. A second aim of the thesis was to re-examine and update a popular yet dated theory of DE, TTD. I generated rich qualitative data through a narrative inquiry research design, which I used to examine the nature of the interactions engaged in by the participants and the effects on their learning experience in terms of how the interactions bridged the separation between them and their learning. I then applied the findings to TTD in order to evaluate its

currency and relevance for the postgraduates studying from a distance in the digital age.

Regarding the first research question about the nature of postgraduate ODLs' interactions, within and beyond the academic environment, the first significant finding revealed the complexity of the interactions experienced by the participants. The data confounded attempts to categorise interactions into simple types, as in Moore's original typology of content, learner, instructor interactions, or more recent additional types, such as technology and life-context. In this way, my research strongly suggests that the literature investigating interaction takes an overly simplistic view of interaction. The interactions articulated by the participants in this study are not linear relationships between learner and content/learner/instructor/technology but involve the learner holistically in an intermingling of several different closely interrelated types and mediators. Moreover, unlike the literature, which is largely concerned with institutionally bound, academic interactions, the participants in this study shared accounts of much broader interaction types such as colleague, family, professional context, and self. Similarly, the interactions described did not exist in any one single space, in this way the findings from this thesis corroborate the findings of the few studies (K. Lee, 2018; Watson, 2013) which acknowledge the importance of the professional context. However, my findings go further by showing the multi-layered nature of interactions which occupy several spaces including the academic, the professional and the socio-cultural sphere. Consequently, the underpinning element of my theoretical framework, Dewey's transactionalism, suggested a reconceptualising of interactions

as transactions. A transaction, being a reciprocal interplay of the individual, the environment and behaviours, more accurately describes the experiences recounted in the participants' narratives. More specifically, I borrowed Bandura's term, 'agentic transactions', based on the most prominent theme of control and agency arising from the data, to highlight the importance of postgraduates exercising personal agency throughout their DE journey.

The second part of the first research question, sought to explore the impact of the interactions, or transactions, on the participants' experience of the distance or separation of their learning journey. The literature dealing with the bridging of the distance between learner and academy, conceptualises the distance as isolation, and therefore focuses on instructional, supportive, community building interaction treatments. However, in my study, the narrative data showed that where the participants were able to exercise individual agency in the learning process, where the transactions were in harmony with their professional context, and where they were able to engage in socially constructive learning, there was little evidence of separation. Indeed, the participants' accounts revealed that agentic, authentic, synergistic transactions were characterised by a proximity, or immersion in the learning. Aligning to Dron (2019, p. 48) I argued for a broader understanding of the teacher in an ODE transaction, to encompass the 'massively interconnected web of cognition in which [...] our intelligence is as much embedded in other people and objects around us as in our brains'.

The second finding concerned TTD and addresses the second research question, which undertook to evaluate the relevance of the theory for today's ODLs. In contrast to much of the literature based on TTD, which adopts a quantitative approach and devises scales to measure TTD, my research applied TTD to rich qualitative narrative data in order to assess its relevance for the postgraduate ODLs. Close analysis of the participants' narratives through the lens of TTD established that Moore's original three components, dialogue, structure and autonomy, were not sufficiently nuanced to account for the participants' experiences. The data revealed additional complementary elements of each of the three original components, so dialogue is enacted as either instructivist or constructivist, structure can function as an enabler as well as a constraint, and autonomy is either required or permitted by the academy. I argued that the original 3-part model, focussed on programme design, and was premised on an instructional perspective, seeking to address the inherent deficit, or handicap of DE. My revised model is grounded in the learners' experiences, which go beyond the instructionally bound conceptions of dialogue, structure and autonomy to learner-centric constructivism, enablement and agency.

8.2 Contributions to knowledge

This thesis offers contributions to knowledge in the field of DE in the areas of theory, practice and HE policy/strategy.

8.2.1 Contribution to ODE theory development

Against the backdrop of the widely acknowledged significance of the role of interaction in ODE, this thesis builds on typologies of interaction to offer a broader conceptualisation of the phenomenon. The narrative data showed that the complex

and multi-faceted interactions experienced by the participants are more accurately understood as educational transactions. This new understanding adds to the knowledge base on ODE interaction by showing that conceptions of interaction are often reductionist and simplistic and overlook the multidimensional nature of interactions as experienced by postgraduate ODLs. I hope that this study may pave the way for subsequent research into ODE interaction using the theoretical lens of transactionalism. Specifically, these findings point to a need for further investigation into the nature of the relationship between the different aspects of these educational transactions and how their relative synergy and agency impact on the ODL experience.

Research and theory development into DE has only relatively recently begun to be systemised (Peters, 2014), with Moore's TTD being one of the first, and arguably most enduring theory dating back to the 1970s. I proposed in the introductory chapter as well as in the theoretical framework, that despite the existence of a reasonable body of research employing TTD, as well as a regular crop of doctoral dissertations making use of it, there have been few attempts to re-examine it from a learner perspective using an interpretivist epistemology. The qualitative findings from my research present a set of components that complement each of the original components and bring the theory in line with the contemporary postgraduate ODL. My proposed model is grounded in learner realities and provides a more nuanced understanding of the alternative qualities of dialogue, structure, and autonomy, these being constructivist dialogue, enabling structure and permitted autonomy.

This new conceptualisation will provide a fresh perspective to DE research and contributes to an approach which is theory driven rather than technology driven.

These theoretical insights suggest an agenda for future ODE research grounded in the learner experience. In this way, micro-level studies should take interaction or the educational transaction as their theoretical underpinning in order to further macro-level theory development, rather than restricting micro-level research to interaction as purely teaching and learning activity, and learner characteristics as predictors of success. In other words, research which explores the educational transaction in order to understand and theorise the ODL experience is needed to consolidate and expand ODE theory. The field would benefit from studies which provide detailed insights and rich understandings of ODLs', not to characterise the 'successful', but to provide a basis for inductive theory development. For example, co-constructing more stories of learners' lived experiences, will help us to understand more fully, what flexible learning means to different individuals and how this might be achieved in ODE.

Additionally, there is a need to transcend the institutional framing of ODE to prompt a shift to a learner-centred, socio-cultural framing. This can be achieved by realigning the research focus from the instructional design or systems perspective to a focus on theory development grounded in the situated learner experience. This shift in focus and purpose of micro-level research can also serve to challenge assumptions that the core of ODE is the academy and the teacher-learner relationship; as this thesis has shown, the core of the postgraduate ODL experience is more often the professional context or the learning process itself and the learner's metacognitive growth. This

knowledge suggests research which seeks to identify more accurately the locus and nature of the separation or gap of ODE, would be beneficial when seeking to reduce the gap or bridge the separation.

8.2.2 Implications for ODE practice

I have consistently argued that ODE research and practice remains bounded by the institutional agenda, which is important for informing practice, but can only go so far. My research takes the next steps to build on our current knowledge and understandings by providing rich insights into the lives of postgraduate ODLs beyond institutionally bound perspectives. Equipped with these new insights, ODE programme designers and instructors will be able to make more informed decisions about the content, tasks, activities, format, and pedagogical approaches.

Realising the importance of individual agency, can prompt educators to consider how to enable and promote this among learners. Practitioners can make use of the new understandings of autonomy and agency in order to ensure tasks are designed in a way that enables learners to exercise individual agency. This should be transparent so that the learners are aware of the underpinning pedagogic rationale.

With particular regard to professional postgraduate ODLs, the findings from this thesis suggest these learners should be involved in decisions about the learning process. This might include making choices regarding partners and group members, and flexibility when interpreting tasks and assignments to ensure individual learning preferences and approaches are embraced. It would also be advisable to give careful consideration to the management of time-bound collaborative work, which is valued

by learners, but needs to be conducted according to personally manageable time scales.

Appreciating the complexity of educational transactions will be critical in moving beyond a reliance on simplistic, linear, one-dimensional interaction treatments to consideration of how best to enable and encourage agentic transactions, which transcend the academic sphere. In addition to learner-learner interaction treatments, alternatives could be provided and more thought given to interactions within the learners' socio-cultural context; these can be explicitly designed with clear prompts to the learner for reflective dialogue about the learning content with the self, and with colleagues, as well as with family and friends.

Knowing the importance of situated and metacognitive learning will induce consideration of ways to include authentic and professionally relevant learning. ODE practitioners can maximise learner engagement with content and the learning process by encouraging learners to embrace learning opportunities beyond the institution, such as in the workplace or, where the learners' professional context is not in synergy with their learning, by participating in academic and professional conferences and social networks.

Instructional design teams including instructional designers, subject matter experts and pedagogues, will be able to make use of these new insights at various stages of the instructional design process, which is invariably conducted separately from the learners. The new understandings of postgraduate ODLs' realities and socio-cultural contexts will be useful in the early stages of the instructional design process when

analysing the learners and their needs. Knowledge about the nature of educational transactions should also be factored into the design process to prompt the incorporation of synergistic and agentic transactions into the task design. This could take the form of a framework of criteria or questions with which to iteratively analyse and evaluate the designed interaction treatments in an ODE programme to identify potential agentic and synergistic transactional opportunities.

The proposed reconceptualisation of TTD will enable instructional designers and instructors of postgraduate ODE to address the unique needs of these learners by not neglecting the learner-centric elements of constructivist dialogue, enabling structure, and permitted autonomy. Rather than contenting themselves with attempts to bridge the gap between learner and instructor, more fruitful efforts can be guided towards allowing a rich and harmonious synergistic transaction which enable the learner to approach their learning on their own terms and from their socio-cultural grounding.

8.2.3 Considerations for higher education policy and strategy

In the introduction to this thesis, I shared three personal experiences which illustrate the disconnect between university mindsets, systems and procedures and the postgraduate ODLs. While I am under no illusions regarding the likelihood of a PhD thesis functioning to overhaul long-established institutional structures, I am hopeful that it will provide ODE instructors such as myself with the research informed evidence needed to raise awareness, to question and challenge some of the institutional practices that fail to cater for the particular needs and circumstances of ODLs. My own institution has recently launched a digital transformation strategy,

one element of which is to increase its fully online offering. This is intended to widen access to oversubscribed on-campus postgraduate programmes for international and lifelong learners, as well as to offer micro-credentials targeted at working professionals seeking a manageable continuing professional development route. This strategy indicates there is some awareness among higher education leaders of the very different priorities, needs and contexts of professional postgraduate ODLs. I hope to contribute to this strategy by providing evidence informed insights and understandings of ODLs to underpin the design and implementation of the new provision.

8.3 Limitations and further research

As indicated in the introduction, it is important for readers to note my constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology, these philosophical stances have informed every aspect of my research. While I feel this is a strength, and I make no apologies for my approach, it is worthwhile addressing potential criticisms here. My methodological choices were informed by my research philosophy and are clearly outlined in the relevant chapter. I am aware that selecting only one data collection tool, loosely structured interviews, albeit supplemented by photo-elicitation, may be considered too narrow a focus. My response to this is twofold, firstly, a 50,000-word thesis necessitates such a focus; secondly, and more importantly, the qualitative data obtained was rich and fully enabled the addressing of my research aims. Nonetheless, in a larger piece of work, or in future projects of this nature, I would have liked to include the additional method of journaling, in which qualitative data is

generated from participants' reflections on critical incidents either in text, image or audio format.

A further potential limitation related to this interpretivist research, is the fact that as a relatively novice researcher, working alone, notwithstanding the support and guidance of my supervisor, all findings and conclusions are based on my analysis and interpretation, and are therefore prone to subjectivity and bias. However, as explained in the methodology, an important element of the research was the co-construction of the participants' stories, therefore sharing my ongoing analyses and interpretations with participants and inviting their feedback throughout was a key feature of the process and contributes to the trustworthiness of the findings. Nevertheless, I acknowledge the power relations at play here, and despite the rapport and egalitarian conversations that comprised the interviews, I have to concede that ultimately I am in a position of power as researcher and writer, and this relationship will colour any negotiations around analysis and interpretation.

The proposed revision of TTD is tentative, it is grounded in the experiences of 12 postgraduate ODLs, and although they represent a range of ages, motivations, professional, educational and cultural backgrounds, were drawn from just five institutions and programmes of study. Their experiences and realities will be different from other cohorts, such as undergraduate or doctoral students, and other institutions and programmes of study. Further research, which undertakes to apply the revised model of TTD to these alternative populations and contexts, would offer useful additional insights as to its wider relevance and usefulness. Furthermore, in

the same way that the original TTD provided the basis for the generation of a range of quantitative scales and measures, I would welcome similar scales designed to 'test' the 6-part revised theory.

As I alluded to in the previous section, the data generated for this thesis is abundant and rich, I found the participants and their stories interesting and important, they shared insights, revelations, and experiences which went beyond the remit of this thesis. It is my intention to tell their stories more comprehensively beyond this thesis, giving each of them the time and space their stories deserve. I am particularly interested in exploring more deeply Sasha's evocative figurative language when describing the significance of the images he chose to represent his experience. I would also like to examine the varying uses of technological tools which the participants used to enhance their learning. I feel that the roles and identities theme could be teased out yet more and might form the basis for further work on the parts ODLs play over the course of their learning journey. There are many more stories remaining to be told.

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Appendix A. Phase 1 interview protocol

Note, these functioned as an aide-memoire and starting points as appropriate. I did not ask all of these systematically.

Outline

Review information sheet & consent form (already signed by participant)

Explain more about the research focus and aims.

Explain the purpose, content and format of the interviews

Request general information about course, year of study, subject, qualification, host institution, home country, reasons for studying, professional status, home/family circumstances, etc.

Explain remit for images and how these will be used in future interviews and final thesis, etc.

Ensure participant understands the need to get consent from any other people appearing in the photos and need to obscure any faces and other identifying features of people or institution.

Explain about Lancaster University Box and how to upload images.

General

Start

Tell me a little bit about the course that you're on. And where you're at with it. And your reasons for choosing the course.

End

How do you feel about being a distance learner?

Transactional distance

Dialogue

See Interactions below

Structure

How would you describe the structure/organisation of the course?

Is it tightly or loosely structured?

How flexible is the course? Is there much room for interpretation or are the tasks & assignments quite clear/structured?

What about alignment - are you aware of alignment between learning outcomes, tasks & activities, assessment?

Do you have any input into the design of the course?

Learner Autonomy

To what extent do you feel you have control over your learning?

Who decides what will be learned? When? How?

Who decides how the learning will be assessed?

What sort of support is provided? How much support do you feel you need?

Would you describe yourself as an independent learner?

Who or where do you go to for support or help?

Interactions

Learner-Instructor & Learner-Learner

Who do you communicate with during your study? How? Why? When? Where? (tutor, institution, admin, peers, etc.)

Can you tell me about these interactions – are they positive, enjoyable, difficult, etc.?

How do they contribute to your learning?

Who initiates the communication? Who controls it?

How would you describe your relationship with your tutors/your peers?

How do you receive feedback? Is it built in or ad hoc? What about quantity & quality?

Learner-Content & Learner Interface

What materials and resources do you use during your study? How? Why? When? Where?

What format (electronic, physical, audiovisual, etc.)?

Where are they? How do you locate them? Are they easy to access/understand/work with?

Can you say a bit more about these materials and resources?

How do they contribute to your learning? (level of challenge; application; critical evaluation)

Who owns them?

Learner-Environment

What about the other people and objects outside of your study (and animals, places, etc.) impact on your learning?

Can you tell me more about these and how they affect your learning?

Appendix B. Remit for producing images

Please produce any photos and/or screenshots* that you feel illustrates something about your experience as an online distance learner. If you don't know where to begin, these prompts may help you get started. However, please don't feel constrained by these, they are just a starting point:

- 'you'
- your worklife/family life/leisure/student, etc.
- your course
- your learning spaces/places
- your learning resources
- your study tools/aids
- interactions, communications, collaborations
- things that help you
- things that challenge you

*Please remember to obscure any faces, names or other identifying information, if possible before sharing with me (if you are not able, I will do this before saving and storing the images)