**Open and distance learning students’ e-learning experiences – a phenomenography of a dual university initiative**

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**Abstract**

This paper reports on the e-learning experiences of staff members who were enrolled in the Master of Education in Open and Distance Learning (MEd in ODL) programme between 2012 and 2015. MEd in ODL is a dual university initiative between the University of South Africa (Unisa) and the University of Maryland University College (UMUC). Only academics who Unisa employs were targeted in this study due to Unisa’s rationale for engaging in this dual university initiative. A cohort of these academics had already qualified with doctoral and professional master’s degrees in various focus areas. We were interested in these academics’ experiences, which comprised varied experiences, views, understandings and needs in respect of such a master’s degree course offered completely online at the two universities as a dual degree. What are Unisa staff members’ e-learning experiences, views, needs and understandings of the MEd in ODL offered by Unisa and UMUC?This question prompted the research into the experiences of the academics concerned. This qualitative phenomenographic study was framed in the variation theory. Seven staff members who were part of the programme were interviewed. Three main themes emerged from the data, namely, (1) experience and understanding, (2) understanding the object of learning and (3) social media. The findings revealed that participants varied in their experiences of e-learning in the dual university initiative. The findings were important for this dual university initiative in so far as improvements that may be necessitated by the findings are concerned.

**Keywords:** Open and distance learning; e-learning experiences; phenomenography; students; variation theory.

# Introduction and research problem

The qualitative phenomenographic study reported in this paper explored the variation theory of e-learning experiences, views, needs and understandings of the staff members of the Unisa who were enrolled in the dual Unisa–UMUC MEd in ODL programme over the period 2012 to 2015.

From an online perspective, experience means students’ activities with computers and the understanding, which can reflect their attitudes expressed through their likes, dislikes, self-confidence of self-efficacy and ideas about the worthiness of a course (Abbiss 2006, 34). The above programme aims to empower Unisa staff members to ensure their effective operation in an ODL teaching and learning environment, which is supported by O’Donoghue, Singh and Green (2004), who assert that the aim of e-learning is to empower the workforce. Unisa and UMUC started to offer the MEd in ODL programme as a partnership in 2012. UMUC offers the coursework component in distance education and e-learning, whereas Unisa offers two additional coursework modules on ODL curriculum development and leadership and management of ODL, and a research dissertation component.

Owing to the advancement and complexities of educational technology and media, learning can now be effectively facilitated via a variety of e-learning management platforms such as WebCT, Sakai and Blackboard. These learning management platforms provide media tools such as blogs, discussion forums and wikis, to name a few. E-learning is a form of flexible learning that uses technologies (Ally 2008; Higher Education Authority 2009) and is “a structured learning activity that utilises technology with intranet/internet-based tools and resources as the delivery method for instruction, research, assessment, and communication” (Michigan Department of Education 2014, 1). Under this learning activity, the teacher and the student are either not at all bound or mostly not bound by space and time (Higher Education Authority 2009, 2; Council on Higher Education 2014, 10).

Unisa and UMUC introduced a master’s degree, namely, the MEd in ODL, that is offered fully online as a dual degree programme between the two universities. This programme is built on academic and professional staff capacity building in ODL. The mandate for such a programme was to respond to societal, public and private sector needs, and ODL is a way to address mass education needed in South Africa and Africa. This master’s degree in ODL was conceptualised to educate leaders in education across professions to capacitate lecturers and others in ODL practices. Unisa offers a range of undergraduate programmes that articulate with this dual master’s degree between UMUC and Unisa. Most lecturers in institutions of higher education do not have an educational qualification in addition to their professional degrees, and this master’s degree will address the gap in teaching skills in ODL and e-learning skills for the technological and digital era. If students outside academia apply and they comply with the admission criteria and the criteria for online access, they will obviously also be admitted to the MEd in ODL.

The master’s degree in ODL is an initiative of Unisa in collaboration with UMUC to build sound ODL and e-learning practices in academia. Many graduates bring with them competencies from their first degree and their professional experience, on which they may want to build. For example, some graduates with a technical background may find that the Master of Distance Education (MDE) offered at UMUC provides just the ‘added value’ they need to qualify them as technical directors in a training institution.

This MEd in ODL was developed in response to the need expressed by Unisa to educate, among others, all new staff members in ODL theory and practice. Workshops were held to establish the need for more structured knowledge development in ODL, and the need to provide training to academic and other staff members in ODL became clear. The design, learning outcomes, expected completion time and delivery method of the programme cater for the learning needs of its target student intake. The programme outcomes meet the needs of regional, national and international markets and especially markets in Africa.

Academics’ experiences, needs, understandings and views in respect of the MEd in ODL are not clear or have not been described previously. Experiences of students who study online are widely described in the ODL literature internationally, but no reference is made to dual university initiatives. Furthermore, students’ experiences in online master’s degrees in ODL are not clearly described in the literature. Lastly, Unisa needs the knowledge and views of online students to inform online learning in future. The research question was centred around the issue of the experiences, needs, understandings and views of academic staff members of Unisa in respect of the MEd in ODL. Many staff members in ODL institutions are yet to be trained in the use of these learning management platforms, which is also the case with Unisa, hence the above initiative. The following question was posited in respect of Unisa staff who were part of this programme: *What are Unisa staff members’ e-learning experiences, views, needs and understandings of the MEd in ODL offered by Unisa and UMUC?* The study reported in this paper sought answers to this research question.

**Literature review**

The challenges that students in different contexts may face in respect of e-learning suggest the importance of orientation into ODL programme in the first place. This is, in turn, a challenge to ODL institutions, since they do not have luxury of meeting students face to face. Students’ orientation into online courses is reportedly an under-researched subject (Gullixon 2010; Melick 2014), yet an important area (Borzath, Chapman and LaMonica 2004; Kelly 2013). E-learning is on the increase, but student retention with respect to e-learning programmes has been much lower compared to that of traditional face-to-face learning (Britto and Rush 2013; Jones 2013). This state of affairs is attributed to insufficient orientation of students into the programmes (Simpson 2012).

Similarly, Jones (2013) illustrates this problem through a study that identified the USA-based Richland Community College’s situation. In the first ten years of the course, students were orientated face to face, yet after the orientation, they were confused and unable to complete their online coursework from home. This was mainly because of technical problems such as incorrect software and computers that were not set up correctly (Jones 2013, 44). This situation suggests that certain fundamental measures should be put in place for orientation to be effective. Jones (2013) reports another study in which a rural community college evaluated its procedures for orientating students into its online courses. After this evaluation, Jones (2013) realised that the students’ needs had not been met. The college developed the ADDIE (analysis, design, development, implement and evaluate) model adopted from Moore and Kearsley (2005) to resolve this problem. The students felt better prepared through the developed orientation programme and their retention increased ultimately.

Orientation smoothens students’ learning going forward. Learning activities happen online where students participate in discussions, complete assignments, post their individual contributions and respond to other students’ postings (Government Accountability Office 2011). Unisa staff members enrolled in the MEd in ODL programme read and discussed themes that were posted weekly by their lecturers, completed individual and/or group assignments, and so on. This kind of student participation happens through computer-mediated communication, which requires that personal commitments be juggled to manage time conflicts and to access the course materials from a variety of locations (Zhang and Kelly 2010, 17). Fetzner (2013, 13) reports a study conducted at Monroe Community College (MCC).

Participation is an aspect of active learning, which in turn is promoted by constructivism (Zhu 2012; Koohang, Kohun, Morris and DeLorenzo 2013). Active learning is generally defined as any instructional method that actively engages students in the learning process. Furthermore, active learning requires students to do meaningful learning activities. It requires students to think about what they do through continuous reflection, synthesis and analysis, and engagement in higher order cognition.

In online-based learning, constructivism is more evident through connectivism (Siemens, Downs and Tittenberger 2009), which is a web of connections that students could form as they reach each other through online technological means. In this sense, learning has a great potential to promote knowledge construction (Zhu 2012). Peters (2002) argues that in recent years, students’ knowledge construction has strongly influenced online education and converted teacher-controlled teaching to student-controlled teaching. This suggests the creation of an environment for student autonomy. This initiative is informed by the cultural and social context of the learning situation and students’ beliefs and attitudes.

Course assessment seems to be the most understudied aspect of online education, even though it has an impact on learning (Arend 2007, 3). This study makes a contribution to the scarce body of knowledge on this aspect. From a student-centred approach and self-progressiveness perspective at the University of Denver in the USA, students are mostly graded according to their assignments, quizzes, papers, tests, group projects, discussion contributions, online educational games, reflections and visual representations (Arend 2007). However, the most common grading students get is for participating in the learning activities (Arend 2007) rather than the quality of their work. While this assessment practice could be viewed as rewarding students’ participation, it is a very superficial way of grading them. The focus is only on whether the students participated or the extent to which they participated and not on what they contributed. Nonetheless, assessment plays a crucial role in motivating students, though other factors may do so as well. The disjuncture between lecturers’ and students’ expectations can hamper students’ performance and discourage them (Zimmerman, Schmidt, Becker, Peterson, Nyland and Surdick 2014). Islam and Ferdowsi surveyed the perceptions of 22 students enrolled in the MEd in Distance Learning programme of the Bangladesh Open University in order “… to see if students’ needs were being met by the program and to obtain a fuller understanding of core aspects of DE” (2014, 10). The study revealed students’ satisfaction with the course materials, choice of modules, feedback on assignments and duration to complete them. Students also showed their dissatisfaction with student support in terms of quality tutorship and access to and provision of resource materials.

**Theoretical framework**

Variation theory was used to describe variations of students’ experiences in the study reported in this paper, since variation theoryowes its origin to the phenomenographic research tradition (Marton 2000; Marton, Runesson and Tsui 2003, 16; Tong 2012) that was used in this study. This theory claims that there is no single way to understand, experience or think about a particular phenomenon because there is considerable variation in people’s discernment (Tong 2012, 3). Indeed, in a learning situation, students conceive of the object of learning in varied ways, based on their existing understandings and epistemologies. Thus, variation theory lays emphasis on learning as a change of experiencing and understanding the object of learning. Variation theory focuses on the object of learning (i.e. what is to be learned) and the ability to discern certain critical features of a phenomenon that one previously did not focus on or took for granted (Marton *et al*. 2003, 16). Defined this way, variation theory was deemed important in this study, because it helped to flesh out varied experiences, understandings and needs of the MEd in ODL students.

**Methodology**

Phenomenography was used to guide data-gathering methods and procedures. Phenomenography reveals different ways in which a phenomenon can be experienced, understood or perceived. Furthermore, it focuses on mapping variations contained in experiences (Suhonen, Thompson, Davies and Kinshuk 2008). Thus, the lens of variation theory was used in this research to explore the experiences of participants who were enrolled for the MEd in ODL. Phenomenography is used in qualitative studies to map out varied ways in which people experience, conceptualise, perceive and understand different aspects of the phenomena existent in the surrounding world (Marton 2000, 31). The focus was on the participants’ experiences of the online MEd in ODL.

In this study, participants’ experiences were investigated using the following main aspects: experience and understanding, understanding the object of learning; and social media.These aspects yielded variations in how participants experienced the MEd in ODL programme. Ethical clearance was obtained from Unisa. Voluntarism about participation in the study was observed.

As with qualitative studies, the rigour of phenomenography is a contentious issue. Validity in this study was embedded in credibility; a full and open account of the study methods is available in this paper and on the institutional repository at: [http://encore.unisa.ac.za/iii/encore/ record/C\_\_Rx1015725\_\_Sgumbo\_\_Orightresult\_\_U\_\_X4?lang=engandsuite=cobalt](http://encore.unisa.ac.za/iii/encore/record/C__Rx1015725__Sgumbo__Orightresult__U__X4?lang=eng&suite=cobalt). Reliability was ensured by thick descriptions of the methodology and the data analysis processes in the paper. Furthermore, two researchers worked on the methodology and checked the data analysis to reach an agreement that all the variations were a true picture of what the participants said. We used bracketing as in phenomenology to set our own preconceptions apart in this phenomenography. We used the bracketing file to check throughout the process of data analysis that our views on the UMUC dual university initiative were not captured in the data. This bracketing process was a kind of structure of awareness to check and control our own subjectivity.

Participants were purposively selected for the study to ensure a variety of experiences, views and needs regarding the newly accredited MEd in ODL programme. Seven participants were interviewed until data saturation was reached. The selection was done from the list of staff members enrolled in the MEd in ODL programme. One extra participant was used to pre-test the semi-structured interview guide to help validate it (Delport and Roestenburg 2011; Foster 2013). No change was done, as this participant did not experience any issues with it. The participants were interviewed individually between September and November 2015. Pseudonyms, namely, MEdSt1 up to MEdSt7 (MEdSt stands for MEd student) were assigned to the participants to ensure their confidentiality. Each interview lasted about 35 minutes and was recorded. Member-checking and triangulation were performed on the gathered data. The main data collection ensued thereafter. Students’ postings on myUnisa (the learning management platform at Unisa) in the Discussion Forum from 2014 to early 2015 were also treated as data.

After several readings of each interview transcript, we marked words and phrases as emerging issues from the data. Three indicators were used to guide us, namely, (1) the frequency of the phrases/issues/words, (2) the position of the statements and (3) statements that appeared important to the participants. The analysis and interpretation followed a thematic approach (Rossman and Rallis 2003).

**Findings**

The findings reveal varied experiences of participants as presented in an integrated manner. There are, however, minimal convergences. The participants’ biographical information, which partly accounts for the variation in their experiences, is presented in table 1.

**Table 1: Biographical information of MEd in ODL students**

| **Student**  | **Stage in the programme** | **Gender**  | **Age range** | **Race**  | **Studied online before?** | **Designation**  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| MEdSt1 | Dissertation  | F | C | B | No  | College of Education |
| MEdSt2 | Just completed coursework | F  | D  | B  | No  | DSPQA |
| MEdSt3 | Dissertation  | M  | D | B  | No  | College of Education |
| MEdSt4 | Dissertation | M  | C  | B  | No  | College of Science, Engineering and Technology |
| MEdSt5 | Dissertation | F  | C  | B  | Yes  | College of Graduate Studies |
| MEdSt6 | Coursework  | F  | B  | B  | Yes  | College of Graduate Studies |
| MEdSt7 | Coursework | F  | D  | B  | Yes  | Directorate: Curriculum and Learning Development |

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

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

Table 1 reveals that the participants were at different stages of the MEd in ODL. Though five of the participants were females and all participants were black, a variation came through other categories in their biographical information, such as age distribution and different departments and colleges at Unisa. Their experience in studying online ranged from ‘no experience’ to ‘more experienced’. The participants were positioned in different sections at Unisa; even though two were from the College of Education and the other two from the College of Graduate Studies. They were in different sub-sections/departments of these colleges. The findings are presented under ‘experience and understanding’, ‘understanding the object of learning’ and ‘social media’. These main themes that emerged during data analysis are displayed in table 2.

**Table 2: Summary of the variations in the study**

| **Variation one**  | **Variation two** | **Variation three** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 1. **Experience and understanding**
 | 1. **Understanding the object of learning**
 | 1. **Social media**
 |
| 1.1 Learning about ODL | 2.1 Active participation and criticality | 3.1 Social media were listed as follows:Twitter, Blogger, wikis, Facebook, Weebly, blogs, Dropbox, YouTube, Google Docs, Google, myUnisa Discussion Forum, Diigo, Web 2.0 technology, mobile devices, Linkedin |
| 1.2 Student orientation | 2.2 Variety of methods | 3.2 Student interactions and community of learning |
| 1.3 Learning online | 2.3 Thirst for the current trends in education |  |
| 1.4 Equipped for e-learning | 2.4 Learning was two-way traffic |  |
| 1.5 Time needed | 2.5 Contribute to other students’ discussions |  |
| 1.6 Change of mind |  |  |
| 1.7 Different learning experiences |  |  |
| 1.8 Too much pressure |  |  |
| 1.9 We did collaborative tasks |  |  |
| 1.10 Assessment and grading |  |  |

**Variation one: Experience and understanding**

This variation was the most complex in the study and it consisted of ten sub-themes, which illustrated the variation of experiences of e-learning during the dual learning initiative between Unisa and UMUC.***Learning about ODL***covered the students’ reasons for enrolling in the programme, which included the acquisition of a basic understanding of ODL; self-development; the acquisition of knowledge and skills; and the acquisition of more information on ODL. MEdSt2 and MEdSt3 enrolled in the programme in order to enhance their understanding, but in different aspects such as education and technology for ODL, and Unisa’s ODL policy and the provision of support to Unisa students using new technologies. MEdSt4 remarked: *I was new at Unisa and I saw the programme as an opportunity to learn about ODL so that I can use acquired skills in my tuition*.

***Student orientation*** into the programme revealed mixed reactions, which are described through these phrases: *good and welcoming* (MEdSt7); *necessary, relevant and prepared me for the deep end* (MEdSt5); *really great and it gave me information* (MEdSt1); *good* (MEdSt6); and *well done”* (MEdSt2). For MEdSt1, the orientation was valuable for someone who has never studied online before. MEdSt6 appreciated the efforts of the Department of Curriculum and Instructional Studies in the College of Education in orientating the students. MEdSt3 raised the concern that the orientation was *more theoretical than practical*. MEdSt4 viewed the orientation as challenging, *especially in cases where I started late after others had begun*.

***Learning online*** focused on new avenues for the students to experience teaching and learning online. The students had to adopt new approaches to learning as demanded especially by UMUC. MEdSt4 and MEdSt5 shared similar views relating to the demands of the course and the time needed outside of their normal work. MEdSt1 had to shift from doing things *face to face* and *had to* adjust and acquire skills *on how to approach e-learning, more especially digital literacy skills*. The course demanded 24-hour access to an internet connection and required the students to move around with technological devices *in order to be able to contribute to the online discussions* (MEdSt6). MEdSt6 had to renegotiate her weekend engagements with her family due to the demands of the course. This seemed easy for MEdSt3, who remarked: *I was technological and computer literate from the school where I was.* The programme brought transformation in the participants’ practice as academics at Unisa. MEdSt4 is now better equipped as a lecturer to engage in good practice and now *understand[s] what students go through in order to learn online*. Online teaching and learning now became easier for MEdSt5. MEdSt1 gained a better understanding of theonline environment. The course transformed MEdSt2 from having *no idea what it means to engage in timed technology-loaded educational activities* to being *sensitive to students’ explanations of why they did not complete work on time*.

The sub-theme ***equipped for e-learning***represents the participants’ views on how the programme enhanced their understanding of teaching online. The substantiations of these positive experiences varied from one student to another. MEdSt6, for example, gained a better *understanding of the theories informing the design and facilitation of e-learning*; MEdSt2 is now *“equipped for e-learning* and all forms of on-line learning.

Furthermore,***time needed***pointed towards the participants’ varying views about their experiences regarding this aspect. The views mostly revolved around the demands of the programme. The fact that everything was happening online and that the students had to submit tasks weekly, with the exception of the Unisa component, *was a lot of pressure that needed discipline and determination* from the students’ side (MEdSt1). The course was very challenging since the students needed time *to complete the assignments* (MEdSt7). There was a *difficult schedule, and [a] very steep learning curve* (MEdSt4). MEdSt2 found the course *very intensive* for someone who worked, and this affected the timeous submission of assignments. She further expressed the intensity of the course as follows: *The foundation module had more than four actions per week all requiring research and hands-on experience of technology that was not too familiar for a beginner. The DETC 630 was too demanding on time activities to a point where I did not expect to pass*.

The sub-theme ***change of mind*** made it possible for MEdSt1 to realise that *it is possible to work as a group in an online classroom*, and MEdSt4 realised that there is a lot that one can learn online. MEdSt5 had a change of mind about gaming: *I thought that gaming, for example, was a waste of time but the assignment of gaming changed my mind into recognising the beneficial and educational parts of gaming.* For MEdSt2 and MEdSt3, e-learning was enriching pedagogically. MEdSt6’s perception was contextualised in an ODL setting at Unisa; she stated: *Unisa needs to do careful planning for the ODL mode. The strategy 2016–2030 needs not be mere talking but proper operationalisation of 24-hour student support, functional and teaching and learning ICT services and dedicated academic staff.* MEdt7 appreciated the application of constructivist theory, stating: *I also saw for the first time constructivism promoting social and communication skills by creating a classroom environment that emphasises collaboration and exchange of ideas in reality and in practice and not in theory.*

Therefore,***different learning experiences*** as a theme focused on the students’ variations in background; for example, MEdSt3 remarked: *... [S]ome students in our group were not coming from [an] education background.* For MEdSt2, most of Unisa staff members were not able to finish the programme due to the variations. While MEdSt4 and MEdSt5 thought that experiences were not dissimilar, MEdSt4 thought that the participants had different learning experiences, stating: *I suppose those who were not new to an education qualification, e-learning, and had plenty of time would have a different learning experience.* A unique finding in this regard is that of MEdSt1, who claimed that she had experienced some form of bullying in the group where she was placed to perform group work.

***Too much pressure*** was concerned with the variedly experienced and troublesome areas in the programme such as the following:

* *To navigate the different tools or platform of myUMUC* (MEdSt3).
* *The interpretation of what the instructor said was sometimes very difficult. Group work and discussion forums grading were sometimes very subjective* (MEdSt7).

***We did collaborative tasks*** was concerned with the online Discussion Forum and group work, which afforded the students opportunities to engage in collaborative learning. According to MEdSt6, the participants contributed to discussions in the Discussion Forum, did collaborative tasks and even had to do peer assessment sometimes. For MEdSt7, collaboration occurred through the Discussion Forum when students interacted with each other and their instructors. MEdSt2, however, was of the opinion that collaboration only happened through group assignments, stating that *learning was collaborative when it came to group assignments and class discussions*, *but everything else was individually oriented.* MEdSt6 added: *Yes, we each had to contribute to the Discussion Forum, we did collaborative tasks and we sometimes had to do peer assessment.* MEdSt3 felt that the group projects enabled the participants to form a community of learning. The Unisa component did not have a group assignment and therefore did not continue to enrich the participants in this regard.

***Assessment and grading*** confirmed that participantshad a positive experience of assessment because it had been explained in advance through assessment outcomes, criteria and rubrics. Two of the participants had some reservations, though. MEdSt2 had doubts about the extent to which assessment was fair. MEdSt7 was of the view that group work and discussion forums were assessed subjectively. The other three participants were of the opinion that the standard of assessment was pitched at a very high standard that differed from Unisa’s standard. MEdSt5 said in this regard: *It was tough when the pass mark was 75% as opposed to 50% – the shift was eye opening and so [when] the Unisa module lecturer gave me 75%, I protested that my work was way above and deserved a better mark; they had to reconsider the mark – they thought 75% was a distinction.*

The findings also reveal that, in a group, some participants never gave their best, but were undeservedly rewarded marks. The two institutional systems (i.e. UMUC and Unisa) caused differences in expectations between the participants and their instructors. For example, MEdSt5 felt she deserved higher marks for the ODL5902 assignment when she compared the standard of her assignment with her UMUC experience. She resultantly queried the mark, and the instructor changed his mind and awarded her a higher mark ultimately. With UMUC it seemed that all efforts concerned with learning were rewarded because participants earned marks even for participating in online discussions. This was not the case with the Discussion Forum on myUnisa.

**Variation two: Understanding the object of learning**

This variation consisted offive sub-themes. The sub-theme ***active participation*** ***and criticality*** was experienced as an element of constructivism. Specifically, in line with the theory of constructivism, MEdSt7 had this to say: *I also saw for the first time constructivism promoting social and communication skills by creating a classroom environment that emphasises collaboration and exchange of ideas in reality and in practice and not in theory.* The nature of the programme and how it was designed required the participants to participate actively in the learning activities. The participants’ views actually confirmed their participation via online discussion forums and the completion of tasks and assignments. MEdSt4 stated: *I participated in all discussion topics within the allocated time every week or according to schedule.* MEdSt7 felt that she *participated very much so* sinceshe did most of the work on her own. Equally so, MEdSt1’s views about participation were strong: *Yes I fully participated in all group work done especially during the group project assignment each and every member of the group was assigned to do a task which was ultimately shared with the entire group and applied to complete the assignment.* For MEdSt3, active participation even meant taking on some form of leadership role: *Yes because at some point I assumed some leadership position in a group so I had to lead and facilitate learning*.

***A variety of methods*** were used in the programme to explain difficult concepts. MEdSt11, in particular, mentioned that *videos, audio streaming, conferences and group work were used to assist students to understand concepts.* MEdSt2 thought that class interactions were the most viable methods to explain challenging terminologies: *There were various teaching methods that made difficult concepts clear. Each module had challenging terminologies which one got used to as they read the prescribed texts. The class interactions through online discussions were an excellent way of learning from classmates and instructors.* However, MEdSt4 thought that *it was not clear if there was such a range of teaching methods for the MEd in ODL.* Undifferentiated methods and technology confronted learning in ODL5902 and ODL5904, because they denied the participants flexibility of learning in the modules. The myUnisa Discussion Forum was the only platform available to the participants to study these modules and it was rather uncomplicated. The findings also reveal that at times it was not clear what the instructors really wanted from the students. The instructors had difficulty in presenting the course, were not always present and were therefore less active, particularly on the discussion platform.

***A thirst for the current trends in education*** was expressed and experienced in very diverse ways. MEdSt5 was motivated to learn new concepts, pedagogies and technologies such as ooVoo. MEdSt1 wanted to learn about current trends in education, wanted to develop herself and sought an understanding of how ODL operates. MEdSt2, MEdSt3 and MEdSt6 were motivated to participate in the programme in as far as it benefited them with reference to their work at Unisa. For example, MEdSt6 stated: *I will be among the few colleagues at Unisa who will be ready to contribute towards successful roll-out of ODL. This programme is also equipping me with the technological skills to facilitate learning and conduct research online. I am also widening my network with the ODL practitioners around the world.* A thirst for the current trends in education motivated MEdSt1, who remarked: *My thirst for the current trends in education drove me to participate in the program*.

***Learning was two-way traffic*** dealt with tight time frames.One participant, MEdSt2, was of the opinion that there was not much time to co-create knowledge due to the tight deadlines for the submission of assignments. This view differed greatly from how other students viewed their contribution. Another participant, MEdSt1, felt that she participated in the co-creation of knowledge from the theories learned in the course. Also, MEdSt3, in referring to the time problem, stated that *learning was a two-way traffic, instructors were also learning from us because we brought a particular experience.* However, MEdSt2 had a different view: *There was no time to dwell on that as the most important thing was to meet deadlines for the submission of assignments*.

The sub-theme, ***contribute to other students’ discussions***, was described in different ways by participants. Some felt that they wanted to work on their own to share the information. Others, however, felt that they owned their learning experiences, even though only three motivated their views in this regard:

* *Yes, I basically learnt as much as I was willing to study the suggested material and contribute to other students’ discussions, at my own time and pace* (MEdSt4).
* *To some extent – it was guided in that resources [were] provided and I could share my experiences* (MEdSt5).
* Yes. This is because I did a lot of research in order to come up with a solution in this course (MEdSt7).

**Variation three: Social media**

This section of the findings focused on the ***social media*** that the students used in their learning experiences. Secondly, it focused on ***how the social media transformed their approach*** to their work at Unisa. They listed a variety of social media together with a variety of experiences that they were exposed to in their learning experiences. The social media included Twitter, Blogger, wikis, Facebook, Weebly, blogs, Dropbox, YouTube, Google Docs, Google, the myUnisa Discussion Forum, Diigo, Web 2.0 technology, mobile devices, Linkedin and the UMUC Student Discussion Forum. Some students did not know the difference between social media and other types of technologies, as is evident from the fact that they listed them together. Google, Web 2.0 technology and the myUnisa Discussion Forum, for example, are not forms of social media.

The students used some of the listed social media as part of their learning. According to MEdSt3, social media were used for student-to-student interaction and student-to-teacher interaction,and the students *formed a community of learning*. MEdSt5 started a blog on distance education. MEdSt1 used quite a number of social media, including Wiki Spaces, Weebly, blogs, Dropbox and YouTube. She managed to create a website via Weebly and created blogs to interact with other students in her group. She used YouTube to search for certain concepts during the research project and used Dropbox to file information for her studies in order to be able to access it anywhere and anytime. According to MEdSt4, learning about social media was an eye opener, since he did not know before that social media could be used for educational purposes. MEdSt2 stated: *I found it hard to keep following various networks that I created during the time because of time constraints*. MEdSt6 felt there was nothing new she could learn, since she was already experienced in the use of social media.

MEdSt4 wanted to link social media with myUnisa, but it seems that she was not aware this was possible: *I wish I could use them but myUnisa does not allow them, so I would have to use them outside myUnisa, which I guess is not allowed.* The programme has brought transformation, which has begun to benefit the participants’ own practice. It is promising that these participants will continue to explore and experiment with Web 2.0 technology and even Web 3.0 technology for purposes of enhancing their teaching.

**Discussion**

Although the participants had positive experiences regarding their orientation into the MEd in ODL programme, there were some concerns, such as that the orientation was more theoretical than practical and, as a result, a late starter in the programme could lose out. The participants had to make a quick shift in how they approached their learning, especially their learning with UMUC. Some of the participants viewed the programme as intensive and they had to learn fast how to manoeuvre their way through online technology in the process of completing their learning activities, participating in online discussions, completing assignments, watching videos and designing their own websites. The participants did not all start the programme with the required basic knowledge and skills, because they had to balance their work responsibilities with their studies and the orientation was more theoretical.

The phenomenon of problems with student retention as a result of questionable orientation strategies for programmes of study is prevalent in South Africa (Jones, 2013). Inadequate orientation could explain why students drop out of programmes. This would suggest the need for a different approach to orientation in keeping with the findings of Borzath *et al*. (2004) and Kelly (2013), who suggest that student orientation should be taken seriously.

The findings of the theories of distance education are crucial for Unisa staff, since they have to be empowered to understand distance education. However, studying while working presents huge demands, as evidenced by the findings – the programme was packed with readings and tight submission deadlines. Some students dropped out because they could not cope with the schedule and some lagged behind as late starters (Fetzner 2013). In some cases, students did not understand the instructors’ instructions, causing them to drop out of the programme.

Class interaction was appreciated as a method of learning. Students were motivated by their new learning in the programme in relation to their reasons for enrolling in it. They experienced co-creation of knowledge, owning of the learning experience and collaboration in learning, especially through group work (Peters 2002). Thus, constructivism found its way into how these students learned in the programme. Constructivism supports learning that is enriched by collaborative and student-engaged approaches; students who are engaged in collaborative learning conditions experience more constructive learning processes (Zhu 2012; Council on Higher Education 2014).

Participants had the opportunity to explore a variety of social media such as Twitter, Blogger, Wiki and Facebook. There was a change of attitude in some participants who realised the educational value of social media such as the ability to form a community of students. Other participants were already advanced in the use of social media and technological platforms. The ability to manipulate Web 2.0 technology has the advantage of transforming lecturers’ teaching to the benefit of students (Alexander and Levine 2008; Zhang and Kelly 2010). Group work and other activities such as accessing each other via online technological means caused the students to virtually draw closer to each other, which motivated this community of learning. In addition, the students experienced some degree of transformation in using and navigating through certain online technologies such as Skype and Twitter.

Students’ experiences reflect variation, as can be realised from the findings of the study. The phenomenon of variation (Marton 2000; Suhonen *et al.* 2008) in the study is the experience of e-learning in the MEd in ODL. According to Tong (2012, 3), variation theory suggests that, in order to discern a certain aspect, one has to experience variation in that aspect. That is the object of learning (Marton *et al.* 2003, 16). Patterns of the variation theory are evident in the findings of this study.

Participants had mixed feelings on the way in which assessment was done. They were positive about the fact that assessment had been explained in advance and that assessment criteria had been given. However, an issue was raised about subjective assessment for group work and participation in discussion forums. Some students believed that they deserved higher marks than they were given. This finding perfectly supports the idea that assessment causes issues of dissatisfaction among students. The Government Accountability Office’s (2011, 11) finding in respect of a student who queried his grade and whose assignment was ultimately re-graded supports this claim. The big gap in the minimum pass mark of Unisa (50%) and UMUC (75%) contributed to students’ disgruntlement.

**Implications for ODL and e-learning and for the dual degree initiative between Unisa and UMUC**

The MEd in ODL offers learning and career pathways to academia and provides students with opportunities for access (online connection), exit points and articulation with programmes at other institutions that also offer ODL modules or courses. Students with a four-year degree or a three-year bachelor’s qualification and an honours qualification, a postgraduate diploma or an equivalent qualification in any academic or professional field (96 credits at National Qualifications Framework (NQF) level 8) were (and will be) considered for admission to the MEd in ODL at Unisa. In preparing students to develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values implied by the programme’s purpose and the general expectations of learners, the MEd in ODL has been structured as follows in line with the qualification registered by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) on the Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQF):

* Firstly, there were students who were new and unexperienced regarding e-learning technologies and those who were more experienced. As a result, participants experienced transformation in various ways. They felt that they had developed a new understanding of how their students at Unisa experienced learning in an ODL context.
* Secondly, they then understood how they as lecturers should support their students towards success. In the light of high dropout rates at ODL institutions, this mindset change could contribute to improved cognitive student support and more positive outcomes for ODL students in general.

The realisation of the lack of orientation in ODL and e-learning, in particular among participants enrolled in the MEd in ODL, suggests that a more focused orientation programme was important for the success of the dual degree between Unisa and UMUC. The candidates were clearly not prepared for the demands of the interactions and the input needed to achieve success in the MEd in ODL. It is recommended that orientation include a part where Unisa staff enrolled in the MEd in ODL receive initial hands-on training in how the programme is presented and in the learning management systems used to present the programme. The training can be presented in computer laboratories.

In line with the orientation programme, a needs analysis should be done to assess the online technological knowledge and skills of the students. This assessment should be done so that the necessary intervention initiatives that will provide on-time learning support can be planned in advance. Unisa staff who were trained in this programme should address the strategy of contributing to knowledge creation more effectively in e-learning. This could be done by creating opportunities for students to take part in social media such as wikis and glossaries on the myUnisa platform. Additionally, student support strategies that are based on the technology-enhanced learning need to be a priority in e-learning at Unisa.

The fact that some of the participants did not take part in the co-construction of knowledge is a reason why more in-depth research is necessary, since constructivism is such an integral part of e-learning. This study validates the fact that not all academics are on the same page regarding e-learning strategies and educational theories in the digital age. It is, therefore, important to consider the re-training of academics to ensure that students get the learning experiences and support they need for the workplace.

The main implication of these findings for the success of the dual master’s degree, that is, the MEd in ODL offered by Unisa and UMUC, is that Unisa should provide an initial orientation programme to staff members who are successful in applying for the dual degree. A four-credit short learning programme in the form of a massive open online course (MOOC) offered at NQF level 8, which includes the following aspects, could ensure a seamless and more enjoyable learning journey for the candidates:

* Outline of the MEd in ODL and requirements for the MEd in ODL.
* Educational technology in the digital age.
* Orientation into the different educational media available in the different modules.
* Time management skills and planning of the learning process over two years. (submitted online on the ePortfolio site).
* Orientation into basic educational theories and specific knowledge on constructivism, technological pedagogical content knowledge development and other relevant theories
* Online learning skills and internet ethics.
* Assessment in the MEd in ODL.
* Support strategies for online learning.

**Conclusion**

This study successfully investigated students’ experiences of studying the MEd in ODL programme, yielding the findings presented above. The findings showed varied experiences of students, which are important to inform decisions that might be taken to improve the offering of e-learning programmes.

The most valuable contribution of this study was that e-learning students at all levels need orientation and support to prevent them from dropping out of courses. This study indicated that even when professional staff member enrol for an e-learning programme, they get frustrated and drop out because they cannot master e-learning technology. A further aspect is the need to provide academic support to students to assist them in mastering the academic work on time and planning their learning journey in advance.

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