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Examining the learning habits of distance education learners in one Southern African university

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Abstract: The way distance learners learn influences the manner in which they succeed in the different programmes of study. This study sought to gather views of selected open and distance learners on how they engaged in learning. The study was located in the interpretivist research paradigm and followed a qualitative research approach of which a case study design was utilised. An open-ended questionnaire was administered on a purposive sample of 18 distance education learners who are practising teachers registered for an education degree programme at one university in Eswatini. Data were analysed for content and conclusions were drawn. The findings of the study revealed that some students learning through distance education had an opportunity to prepare for their contact class while some struggled with balancing up work, family, and study time. The findings of the study also revealed that students had an opportunity to prepare for their assignments and tests as individuals and in groups as well. The study found that some students preferred studying alone, while others would study alone and in groups as well. The main conclusions of the study were that students studying through open and distance education prepared for classes while some did not, and that students did their work as individuals and some in groups. The study recommends that orientations be done to help students manage their time for study, family, and work.

Keywords: learning, habits, distance education, distance learners, open education.

Introduction

Institutions currently offer online courses to expand their teaching methods with distance learning courses and the learners' learning habits determines the level of the learners' success. Distance Education students do not have a proper learning style as most of them do not go through orientation after enrolling (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2012). Oxbridge Academy (2015) points out that a student studying through distance education has benefits that encompass the convenience of studying at their own pace, and in their own time. Students make a preference to do distance learning because of the diverse distance and time needs as well as students' needs which include different learning habits and study habits (Çakıroğlu, 2015). Fleming (2001) reveals that a learning habits is an individual's favoured way of collecting, organizing, and thinking about information. Aragon, Johnson and Shaik (2002) point out that a learning habits involves learners' preferred ways to receive, process, and recall information during instruction which is related to learners' motivation and information-processing habits.

Literature

Learning Habits

Learning habits of distance education learners involve personal learning preferences, problem-solving skills, and project working skills (Ozdamar-Keskin, Ozata, Banar, & Royle, 2015). Ambar and Boedhi (2018) point out that, learning in a higher education institution that applies an open and distance learning system requires the students to study as independent learners. The study habits of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) students are also connected with the students' performances. Study habits reflect students' usual act of studying and also call forth and serve to direct the learner's cognitive processes during learning. Proctor, Prevatt, Adams, Reaser, and Petscher (2006) state that study habits include activities such as time management, setting appropriate goals, choosing an appropriate study environment, using appropriate note-taking strategies, choosing main ideas, and organization information.

Faize (2014) reveals that educators responsible for ODL students have a task to search for the most suitable learning environments for students' study habits, according to the technology used. Online settings can meet learners' needs in open and distance learning by ensuring that learners utilise available media or material to enhance their learning as they learn at their own place, pace and time (Georgiadou & Siakas, 2006). Online learning platforms enable a wide variety of videos, images, animations, texts, and audios to be created and shared. In this sense, Sharpe and Benfield (2005) reviewed the experiences and study habits of e-learners in higher education to identify areas worthy of future investigation. In their study, Sharpe and Benfield (2005) found that there were some connections among habits and performances and suggested a deeper investigation into eliciting the experiences, habits, and strategies of effective e-learners. The recent developments in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) technologies have grabbed the attention of researchers regarding how pedagogical approaches are required to function within this framework. ODL students are, therefore expected to exhibit a great level of digital literacy (Maphosa & Bhebhe, 2019).

There are habits that successful distance education learners have like surrounding themselves with the right people. There is a need for learners learning through the distance to surround themselves with peers who will give them the courage to learn and support them during their studies. Their support networks might consist of positive and supportive friends, family members, and even fellow distance education learners (Au & Wong, 2018).

Successful distance education learners focus on the future

In other words, they don't allow past failures to hold them back (Sharpe & Benfield, 2005). They focus on where they want to be and what they want to achieve in life. Most distance education learners often have some other tasks in addition to their studies, and by choosing to study, they are adding another item to their list of responsibilities, but for good cause. The learners usually start distance education studies with dreams and try by all means to ensure that nothing stops them from attaining their goal. Jordarn (2009) terms the responsibilities of a student, other than studying, external responsibilities. Some distance education learners still succeed despite the external responsibilities they have.

The success of distance education learners thrives on the fact that they are in most cases self-motivated rather than discouraged, by criticism and setbacks. A failed assignment only encourages them to do better in the next one. Vandermeulen (2011) points out that mistakes and failures are the *best* teachers and they encourage learners to understand the importance of practice to perfect and improve in learning. Furthermore, learners should engage with content repeatedly until understanding is enhanced. Challenges in learning are viewed as opportunities to learn, grow and improve (McCarthy, 2016).

Wood (2015) points out that prosperous ODL learners are also open-minded. They are in a position to acknowledge that there might be more than one solution to a particular problem. They think creatively and challenge themselves to be different from the norm. They also do not complain and if a situation can't be changed, they adapt and deal with it. They know that complaining about something will only add to the weight on one's shoulders, and realise that it is best to stay positive and to accept the situation for what it is (Sharpe & Benfield, 2005).

Learning habits explored

Learning habits generally focus on ways of learning. Fleming (2001) describes learning habits as an individual's ideal way of collecting, organizing, and thinking about information or the behaviours related to the psychological, cognitive, and affective domains of interaction with learning environments. Learning habits involves learners' preferred ways to receive, process, and recall information during instruction which is related to learners' motivation and information-processing habits (Aragon, Johnson, & Shaik, 2002).

Learning habits may be enhanced by paying attention to learners' personal characteristics as materials are designed and also in the delivery of the instruction (Dziuban, Moskal, & Hartman, 2004; Fearing & Riley, 2005). Some learners tend to focus on facts, data, or procedures, engaging with theories and mathematical models are also appropriate. Some learners prefer using visual information like pictures, diagrams, and simulations to understand better, while others may get more from oral and written information. Learning habits also function as a useful indicator for potential learning performance (Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Smith & Ragan, 1999; Sun et al., 2008).

One of the popular learning habits inventories for determining adults' learning habits is Kolb's (1985) Learning Style Inventory (LSI). It includes four dimensions: a concrete experience which has to do with feeling, a reflective observation which involves watching, an abstract conceptualization which is thinking, and active experimentation which entails doing (Kolb, 1985).

Jonassen and Grabowski (1993) in their study suggested that the LSI was more suited to having learners explore their learning habits than predicting their ability to succeed. Terrell (2002) made a comparison of graduation rate by learning habits of 216 students and found that most of the learners were either convergers or assimilators and the comparison was not statistically significant. Also, Fahy and Ally (2005) used Kolb's LSI for two online courses including asynchronous discussions. Akkoyunlu and Soyulu (2008) revealed that learners' views on the blended learning process, such as ease of use of the web environment, evaluation, face to face environment, and so on, differ according to their learning habits. On the other hand, Honey and Mumford (1986) developed a self-development tool based on Kolb's model by inviting managers to address trainees' learning habits preferences. They used the tool on a wide range of higher education students. In this instrument, they identified four distinct learning habits: activists, theorists, pragmatists, and reflectors.

The utilisation of study groups has also been observed to be an important learning habits for distance education learners. In a similar study of study methods, Bukaliya and Mubika (2015) found that ODL learners in Zimbabwe preferred to study in groups to studying alone. The benefits of studying in groups were immense as they ranged from dealing with the loneliness associated with distance learning to providing platforms to meet and share ideas as peers. In a related study, Wasley (2006) cited in Bukaliya and Mubika (2015) found that participation in group learning assisted learners to get better grades as they were provided with opportunities for active and reflective learning.

Learning habits in distance learning

Some researchers focused on the learning habits of distance learners. In this sense, Allen et al. (2002) suggested delivering courses in a variety of formats to accommodate multiple learning habits. Benbunan-Fich and Hiltz (2003) deemed it necessary to research the relationship between learning habits, the chosen mode of delivery, and learner success. In another study Liegle and Janicki (2006) investigated the effect of learning habits on the Internet navigation needs of web-based learners, finding that learners as explorers provided a higher number of visits to linked web pages, whereas observers tended to be more passive. Also, a few of the studies focused on academic performances and learning habits. Akdemir and Koszalkab (2008) determined the relationships between instructional strategies and learning habits in an online graduate-level course. In the study, although using different kinds of instructional strategies for various learning habits learners' performances were equivalent. In another study, Popescu (2010) studied relationships between web-based educational systems and learning habits and found that accommodators benefited more than others in the learning process. Also, Shaw (2012) found that different learning habits were associated with significantly different learning scores. Besides, Schellens and Valcke (2000) and Neuhauser (2002) did not find such relationships between learning habits and learning performance in online learning.

Some studies were conducted in the Open and Distance learning area using Kolb's (1986) inventory. In one of those studies, Wang et al. (2006) focused on the effects of formative assessment and learning habits on student performances in a web-based learning environment. The results showed that both learning habits and formative assessment strategy were significant factors affecting learner achievement in a web-based learning environment. Sun et al. (2008) used Kolb's inventory for investigating the learning outcomes related to different learning habits in a virtual science laboratory for elementary school learners. Learners who used the online virtual laboratory were not significantly different from learners of different learning habits.

The utilisation of improper learning habits and learning habits may be responsible for high dropout rates from programmes by distance education learners when compared to learners in full-time traditional face to face contact programmes (Hodges, 2004; Moshinskie, 2002). Distance education learners are, therefore, expected to exhibit high levels of multi-tasking since most of them are mature adults with other non-academic responsibilities.

Distance education learners should also exhibit high levels of self-directedness (Stoter, Bullen, Zawacki-Richter & Von Prummer (2014). Self-directedness enables learners to work on their own as they engage with learning materials provided in print or electronic formats. In instances where learners attend contact

class sessions and tutorials, self-directed students prepare adequately for such sessions. Learners also work to prepare their assignments, tests, and examinations on time. In a related study, Barnard-Brak, Lan, and Paton (2010) found that learners who engaged in self-regulation of their studies had a better chance of enhanced academic achievement. Fotiadou, Angelaki, and Mavroidis (2017) further underscore the importance of learners' taking ownership of their studies and showing greater autonomy. Vasiloudis, Koutsouba, and Giossos, (2015: 114) state that autonomy "is a characteristic of learners who can exert control on their learning and manage it in a self-reliant manner".

In developing appropriate and useful study habits, ODL learners should manage their time very well since time management is an important learner characteristic (Hart, 2012; Stoter et al., 2014). The characteristic of effective time management in distance education learners is also linked to their establishing good working relations with fellow learners as well as successful completion of their studies (Hart 2012). The importance of time management as an integral component of developing useful learning habits for ODL learner can, therefore, not be overemphasised.

Statement of the problem

Open and distance education learners have challenges in balancing up a time to study, work and be with family. Learners find themselves struggling to prepare for their classes, prepare for their tests as well as assignments. Learning habits have an impact on the learners' success especially in distance education (Çakıroğlu, 2015). The learning habits learners adopt entail the behaviours related to the psychological, cognitive, and affective domains of interaction with learning environments that learners encounter, which could be influenced by family and work (Fleming, 2001).

Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study were to:

- Explore the learning habits of learners learning through open and distance education.
- Establish how distance education learners prepared for class, tests, and assignments.

Theoretical Framework

The study was underpinned by the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which captures the importance of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in learning (Deci & Ryan, 1985 in Harnett et al., 2011). Self-determination, according to Harnett et al., (2011) observes that individual autonomy as shown in one's intrinsic motivation drives one to work toward achieving a specific goal. Ryan, Kuhl, and Deci (1997:701), state that:

SDT is an approach to human motivation and personality that uses traditional empirical methods while employing an organismic metatheory that highlights the importance of humans' evolved inner resources for personality development and behavioural self-regulation.

Understanding of learning habits in this study was hinged on the degree of self-direction and self-regulation distance education learners employed in their studies. The elements of self-direction and self-regulation are indicators of levels of motivation, intrinsic and extrinsic. Learner's autonomy in distance education programmes is also important in the SDT (Tsitlakidou, 2011).

The study is also informed by Moore's theory of transactional distance (Moore, 1997; 2007). Moore's theory of transactional distance brings together three important factors namely; dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy. Moore (1997) states that dialogue refers to the interaction between the learners and the tutor, whereas structure is the level of the course flexibility and rigidity. Learner autonomy is dependent upon dialogue and structure linked to the learners' ability to control their learning and manage it independently by drafting a plan for their studies and searching relevant information and sources as well as evaluating their progress. In the context of the present study, the said theory assisted in understanding learners' degree of autonomy in their studies as evidenced by their learning habits.

Methodology

Research paradigm

The study was located in the interpretivist research paradigm. They tend to research issues from a personal experience perspective (Žukauskas, 2018).

The interpretivist paradigm believes that reality is multi-layered and complex and a single phenomenon can have multiple interpretations. In studying a phenomenon, research techniques are used that will help us understand how people interpret and interact within their social environment. (Intgrty, 2016).

Their findings in interpretive research are often not generalizable to entire populations but are rather specific to particular situations and circumstances. They are often associated with the collection of qualitative data that leads to multiple interpretations (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Creswell, 2014). In this study multiple interactions were done to obtain information on ODL learners' learning habits. In this study the research paradigm used enabled the researchers to interact and collect data from the participants.

Research Approach

A qualitative research approach was utilised in this study. Hammarberg, Kirkman and de Lacey (2016: 499) postulate that a qualitative approach is "used to answer questions about experience, meaning and perspective, most often from the standpoint of the participant". The qualitative research approach is concerned with establishing the experiences, meanings and perspectives of participants. In the present study experiences regarding learning habits were sought from learners studying through the open and distance delivery mode, with emphasis on understanding their experiences from their point of view.

Research Design

A research methodology denotes the process of studying how research is systematically done (Creswell, 2013). In this section, the researchers explain and justify the methodological processes and procedures for the study.

A qualitative case study design was followed in the study. Simons (2009:21) defines a case study as "an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, program or system in a 'real-life'". Yin (2002:13) defines a case as "a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between a phenomenon and context are not clear and the researcher has little control over the phenomenon and context". In the context of the present study, the case of study habits about distance education learners in one rural university in Eswatini was studied. The sought an in-depth understanding of learners' learning habits.

Data Collecting Tools

The researchers utilised an open-ended questionnaire to collect data. Lewis-Beck, Bryman, and Futing (2004) point out that open-ended questions, are also called open, unstructured, or qualitative questions. The Open-ended questionnaires employ those questions for which the response patterns or answer categories are provided by the respondent, not the interviewer. The open-ended questionnaire allowed the research participants to freely express themselves.

Sampling or Study Group

An open-ended questionnaire was administered on a purposive sample of 18 learners, practising teachers registered for a professional development programme in Education at one university in Eswatini.

Data Analysis

The thematic content analysis technique was utilised to analyse qualitative data collected from the participants' responses to the open-ended questionnaire. The University of Pretoria (2020) points out that, data analysis gives a summary and interpretation of data collected to define patterns, connections or trends in the phenomenon studied.

Ethical issues

Ethical issues are considered as one of the most vital parts of any research (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2012). In this study, the researchers attended to key ethical issues such as confidentiality, anonymity and informed consent.

Research Procedures

The researchers sought consent from the research participants who verbally agreed to fill in the questionnaires but refused to sign any consent forms in case their signatures were traced. The questionnaires were distributed personally by the researchers to the 18 participants who were purposely selected because they are studying through distance education. The respondents were given a week to

respond to the questions, after a week the filled in questionnaires were given back to the researchers who then started analyzing and coding data to come up with the themes.

Findings and Discussions

This section of the paper presents the results of the study, starting with some description of the research participants.

Description of the participants

The table below shows that male and female learners participated in the study. The learners were mostly above the age of twenty-five, and this was a consistent view of distance education students as old and mature learners. Participants were also drawn from basically one Education programme with different specialisations in Secondary Education, Primary Education, and Adult Education. Participants were mostly in their final year of study, hence considered information-rich sources, owing to their many years of experience as distance education students.

Table 1: Description of the research participants

Participant Code	Gender	Age	Programme of Study	Level
A	Male	32	B. Ed Adult Education	3
B	Male	34	B. Ed Primary	4
C	Female	36	B. Ed Primary	4
D	Female	30	B. Ed Primary	4
E	Female	30	B. Ed Secondary	4
F	Female	32	B. Ed Secondary	3
G	Female	40	B. Ed Secondary	4
H	Male	32	B. Ed Secondary	3
I	Male	28	B. Ed Secondary	4
J	Male	31	B. Ed Secondary	4
K	Female	35	B. Ed Adult Education	4
L	Female	26	B. Ed Primary	4
M	Female	31	B. Ed Primary	4
N	Female	33	B. Ed Primary	3
O	Female	35	B. Ed Adult Education	3
P	Female	27	B. Ed Adult Education	4
Q	Male	28	B. Ed Primary	4
R	Female	28	B. Ed Primary	4

The results of the study were presented according to the themes that emerged from the study. The table 2 summarises the participants' views on their learning habits.

Table 2: Participants' views on learning habits

Research objective	Thematic issue	Issues raised
Explore the learning habits of learners learning through open and distance education.	Preparation for contact sessions	Found time to prepare for classes Did not find time to prepare for classes
	Preparation for assignments and tests	Lack of time due to competing demands at home and work
Establish how the learners prepared for class, tests, and assignments	Working as individuals	always working alone at home
	Working in groups	Worked with classmates

Preparation for contact sessions

The research participants were asked to relate how they prepare for a class before coming for contact sessions. Participants revealed that they have various ways in which they prepare for their class. Through a questaview Participant P said, "I usually read on the module of that specific course I am studying on that weekend." While Participant A revealed that, "I give myself time before the contact sessions to study and read ahead, guided by modules provided by the university."

Similarly, Participant C pointed out, *"I read the module units before going to class at times, but, I sometimes go to class without a clue of what is going to happen."* Participant F revealed that *"I try to read and prepare assignments but sometimes have difficulty finding the time."* On a similar note one Participant B said that;

Learning through distance education is sometimes very strenuous and difficult because the time to prepare is not there. I sometimes read on that particular topic that we are to learn on that particular day, from the module and derive my questions related to the topic before coming for a contact session.

Participant H stated that *"I read modules and other books that relate to the next lesson."* On the same note, Participant M revealed that *"I make sure I read and remind myself about the previous lesson in that particular course."* Participant H also mentioned that *"I read my module and write short notes."* While Participant M mentioned that, *"I sometimes read the modules in preparation for the next class."*

Still, on the same question on preparing for a contact session, Participant N revealed that *"I start preparing for class the previous day to look at the methods."* While Participant G revealed that,

I start preparing for my coming class during the week. I make sure I write my assignments on time to meet the deadline. I also give myself time to study my work although it is not easy at times since I am always busy with marking.

Contrary to the other students, Participant K revealed that *"I have no time to prepare for my distance education classes. I am encountered with work and even family comes in to give me a hectic schedule."* Similarly, Participant D mentioned that *"I normally do not prepare myself for the class as I am always swamped with schoolwork. As a teacher, I am teaching many classes and I always have a bunch of books to mark, including tests."* Similarly, Participant L revealed that *"In most cases, I do not prepare at all due to work commitments. It is only a few instances that I would read ahead in preparation for lectures especially during school vacation."*

The participants had innumerable responses to the question they were asked. The participants mentioned that they did prepare for their contact time before the day. The responses also revealed that the time they had was sometimes too limited for them to balance up work, family, and studies. From the participants' responses, it came out that, some participants had no time to prepare for their contact classes.

Preparation for assignments and tests

Participants were also asked to describe how they prepared for their assignments and tests. An assortment of responses was provided. Participant A revealed that *"I usually have discussions with my colleagues before tests, which we do in the evenings and do some individual work. For assignments, I rely on the internet and download to get the information needed."* While Participant D mentioned that, *"I study for tests as an individual and then discuss with colleagues on Friday afternoons or Saturdays. I normally borrow library books during the weekend for assignments because I stay very far from campus."* Participant G stated that *"I prepare assignments late at night by using Google. If I get time I go to the library. For tests, I study at night after I am done with my lesson preparation books."*

Similarly, Participant M mentioned that *"For tests, I study hard as an individual. For assignments, we first discuss the assignment with my group members and I then do research."* While Participant N stated that, *"I go to the library to research my assignment and study for my test at home and after school, I stay behind."* Participant P revealed that;

I study for tests alone as I stay far, but if I have a concern, I call someone to help. With the assignment, sometimes it is hard as I have to juggle work, learning, and being a parent, but at the end of it all, I submit.

On the same note, the participants stated how they prepared for their assignments and tests as distance education students who are working and learning at the same time. Participant O revealed that *"For an assignment, I read around the given topic to be answered, then in use internet and modules to answer the questions. For a test, I use past papers and discuss them as a group."* While Participant Q revealed that,

I study with my group of classmates and we read together. Assignments are prepared by using the internet because there is no time to prepare and read books. During the weekends when we come for our contact sessions, the library will be closed.

Participant J mentioned that *"I always make sure that I get enough information about the question given to me using the internet and books available at the library.* Participant B revealed that;

I visit the library to read more books, and then also use the internet. I then use my Wi-Fi at home to download and check for facts from the Internet. I then gather the information and facts and then start on the test and assignments.

Contrary to the response given by other participants, Participant E mentioned that *"I access the internet from my smartphone. I rarely use books, as the library is inaccessible on weekends. I prepare for tests a night before because of time constraints."* While Participant K revealed that;

I study through the course outline and try to acquaint myself with the course requirements. After having read assignments, I research the computer labs. For tests, I study through notes and additional learning materials. Group study has also helped me a lot.

Participant C mentioned that;

With assignments, I do them online. I search for books and extract information that concerns the particular concept I am looking for. With tests, I read my module and my notes, then attend group discussions. This helps in having a better understanding and equipping me with knowledge.

Participant D resorted to truancy to succeed in preparing for assignments and tests, the student mentioned that, *"When preparing for assignments, I usually skip the home chores and let my 11-year-old daughter take care of them. For tests, I am usually forced by circumstances to abscond other classes to prepare for the test."* While others have scheduled times for their studies like Participant C who mentioned that;

After work, I have two hours each day to study and collect data for my assignments. Tests, we discuss them in a group and we look over what we have done during contact sessions. Then during my study time, I look at what I have done in group works.

The study revealed that there are various ways in which learners learning through distance education prepare for their tests and assignments. The respondents mentioned using the internet and other online means. They also mentioned group discussions and individual work. Some could have access to the library while some had no access to the library.

Studying as individuals or with partners in distance education

The study sought to establish from the participants how they studied with partner or partners or how they study alone. Participant N revealed that *"I study alone. I rely on the internet, Google and a little usage of hardcopy materials."* While Participant P mentioned that, *"I study with partners, sometimes alone because discussions are hard when you do not know anything."* On the same note Participant G mentioned that *"I first study alone in my house, then we organise time with my partners, then we discuss what we have been reading. Then we read past question papers and answer them orally as a group."*

Participant E responded by stating that, *"No! I study alone by reading my modules."* Student L mentioned that, *"No! I set time apart every afternoon just to study."* While Participant B mentioned that, *"I study with partners. We organise a day and venue and discuss past papers particularly for that course that we are studying."* Participant O revealed that *"I prefer studying in groups. We form a group, formulate questions and try to solve them together."*

Similarly, Participant A mentioned that *"I study with partners by arranging some time for group discussions."* While Student Q revealed that, *"Yes! We make a group discussion every Friday and each member presents a certain topic."*

Two students had contrasting but similar views. Participant H mentioned that *"I study both alone and with partners. I first engage in group discussions then later I focus on studying on my own."* While Participant D mentioned that, *"I study alone during mid-week, then I usually study with my colleagues on weekends, we form groups."*

Participant J stated that *"I have a study group but we also do individual studies in our places of abode to make meaningful contributions."* Participant I revealed that *"I study alone, but later attend group discussions. I read through and later write important points. I then recite what I have just learned."* While on the other hand one, Student P mentioned that;

I always study alone, using my module, test scripts, and past examination papers. This is because I commute every weekend to the university as I do not have accommodation around. However, when I started my programme I used to study with partners, as we used to gather in study groups.

The data collected from the participants revealed that there were learners who studied alone, while others had some work they did on their own and some which they did with others. Data also revealed that some learners were comfortable working together with others as a group.

Discussion

The study found that the participants indicated that they prepared for contact sessions by engaging in prior reading of their print modules. This finding is consistent with critical aspects of the Self-determination theory which alludes to learners taking ownership of their studies and being autonomous (Harnett et al., (2011). Similarly, the finding also alludes to learners' desire to reduce the transactional distance by engaging with course content on their own. Learners' engagement in prior preparation for contact sessions shows autonomy and self-reliance in their studies (Vasiloudis, Koutsouba & Giossos, (2015).

The study also found that some learners struggled to balance between academic and other personal commitments, which resulted in their failure to prepare for their contact classes. This finding resonates with aspects of the SDT, which emphasise self-direction and self-regulation as significant components of learner autonomy in distance education (Tsitlakidou, 2011). Distance education learners are expected to master the art of multitasking if they are to persist and succeed in studies.

It was also established from the study that some learners preferred working with others hence utilised study groups. The finding was consistent with findings by Bukaliya and Mubika (2015) that distance education learners enjoyed working in groups and that group learning assisted them to deal with loneliness and provide opportunities to work with others collaboratively. However, other learners preferred working on their own. This points to the different learning habits and learning habits exhibited by ODL learning.

The different ways of engagement with content revealed by participants in the study are important to note. Some participants revealed that they utilised the internet to access more information about their studies. This finding supports earlier findings by Sharpe and Benfield (2005) who found that distance education learners who were effective e-learners were predisposed to improved distance education learning experiences since technology integration enhanced teaching and learning. This observation also resonates well with the two theories underpinning the study. In the SDT it shows self-regulation, self-direction, and autonomy for a learner to engage in their learning through online activities. Similarly, effective participation in online activities reduces the pedagogical distance and enhances learning in line with Moore's transactional distance theory.

Conclusion and Suggestions

The study concludes that learners learning through open and distance education had various ways in which they prepared for their classes, some read modules, while others read notes. The study also revealed that some learners never prepared for their classes but just attend class. The study concludes that learners had a chance to prepare for their tests and assignments. Data collected from the study revealed that learners studying through open and distance education at the university studied had an opportunity to meet with their colleagues and study and at the same time they utilised the Internet to search for information and also utilised informal study groups.

The study recommends that learners studying through open and distance learning be oriented on how to budget their time so that they all get a chance to prepare for their classes, assignments, and tests accordingly. The study also recommends that learners should be allowed to visit the library when they come into the university for their contact session, library hours should be flexible enough to accommodate learners learning through open and distance education.

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