

**THE EXPERIENCES OF ADULT LEARNERS IN DISTANCE LEARNING AT
THE SOUTH AFRICAN COLLEGE FOR TEACHER EDUCATION**

by

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research was to gain an understanding of the experiences of adult learners engaged in a distance learning programme in Early Childhood Development at the South African College for Teacher Education. It is argued that distance education learners have different needs and experiences to their counterparts at contact universities, and for this reason, distance providers should understand the experiences, needs and characteristics of adult distance learners in order to design quality course material and give effective student support.

In light of the above argument, qualitative research was conducted using interviews and the collection of documents for data collection. Ten participants were purposefully selected by maximum variation sampling to represent the widest possible range of experience. They were then interviewed in order to gain insight into their experiences as distance learners at SACTE. The data were then analysed and the findings written up.

The findings of the research show that most students experienced excitement and fear at the outset of the course – excitement because of the new experience and fear because they were uncertain what to expect. Students' enjoyment of the course was enhanced by the use of mechanical media, such as video recordings, the usage of interactive text, and by the relevancy of the course material, that is, when they could apply it to the workplace.

Students' responses in the interviews contained valuable information on their perceptions of the course. They were able to give feedback on ways in which they believed the course could be improved such as regular contact sessions and more efficient administrative support.

THE EXPERIENCES OF ADULT LEARNERS IN DISTANCE LEARNING AT THE SOUTH AFRICAN COLLEGE FOR TEACHER EDUCATION

1. INTRODUCTION

... Inviting people to tell their stories, to share their hopes and fears, to simply express their experiences of an educational event, is a way to show this respect for them as subjects of their own lives as well of their own learning (Vella, 1994:185).

Students enrolled at a distance education institution have different experiences to those of their counterparts at a contact university. They do not see their lecturers regularly or have contact with other students on a daily basis. Therefore the teaching of adult distance learners differs from teaching learners at a contact university. I am in agreement with Cyrs (1997:18) when he says: "Anyone who says that teaching at a distance is the same as traditional teaching is dead wrong. Instructors need more planning time, more instructional support, and additional training to modify courses for all the potential delivery formats for distance teaching." Distance education providers should understand the characteristics and experiences of distance learners in order to design quality course material and give effective student support.

The first section of this research essay focuses on the orientation to the problem. Thereafter follows the problem statement and the aim of the study. In addition, I present my assumptions and presuppositions pertaining to this study. This is followed by a review of the relevant literature, which is drawn from the literature on distance education, adult and higher education. I then discuss the research strategy used in this research, followed by a presentation of the data. Thereafter, I present and discuss the findings of this research. Finally, I conclude this essay with possible recommendations for distance education providers involved in higher education in South Africa.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT AND RESEARCH QUESTION

Recently there has been growing interest in distance education, as it has become a major form of teaching and learning all over the world. In South Africa, the importance of distance learning at higher education institutions has been stressed in the draft Education White Paper (1997:18), in which the ministry states that “distance education based on the principles of open learning and resource-based learning has a crucial role to play in meeting the challenge of greater access and enhanced quality in a context of resource constraints and a diverse student body. It enables learning to take place in different contexts, at a multiplicity of sites, through a variety of mechanisms and learning and teaching approaches.” De Wolf (in Tuijnman, 1996:639) views Holmberg’s proposed definition of distance education as the most accepted definition. It reads as follows:

The term distance education covers the various forms of teaching and learning at all levels which are not under the continuous, immediate supervision of tutors present with their students in lecturing rooms or on the same premises, but which nevertheless benefit from the planning, guidance and tuition (i.e. tutoring, teaching) of the staff of a tutorial organization. Its main characteristic is that it relies on noncontiguous, i.e. mediated, communication. Distance study denotes the activity of the students, distance teaching that of the tutorial organization.

Although the importance of distance education in higher education is undeniable, as stated above, it is clear in the literature that there are many problems that distance providers and learners face. In the past, the learning material of face-to-face, that is, contact institutions, was used for distance learners without success. The problem is that in face-to-face education the students learn with the educators’ direct support, while in distance education this is not the case. In distance education, the communication between the learner and the educator is facilitated by print, electronic and mechanical devices. For this reason, printed material for distance education has to include aspects such as guidelines for study, self-tests, explanations and examples to ensure accessibility, and sufficient study stimuli. The way in which the material is developed depends on the specific level of education to be reached, the quality assurance criteria, and on the degree of face-to-face contact comprehended (De Wolf

in Tuijnman, 1996:638-645). Consequently, it is obvious that the adult distance learner has different needs, expectations and experiences of learning to the full-time student at a higher education institution. Thus, it is important for distance providers to know what knowledge students themselves think they need and to develop courses that take into account what they want to learn and how they experience their learning. Students may be used as a source of knowledge to develop and improve instructional design. As a result, I decided to focus this research on the experiences of the adult learners engaged in a learning programme designed for distance learners at SACTE. The information gained could be used to inform instructional design. The research could also shed light on the diverse learning needs of adult learners engaged in distance learning, and possible ways of catering for them when designing programmes. Therefore, the research question that guided the research reported on in this essay is: What are the experiences of adult learners engaged in learning at a distance education institution?

3. AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study is to gain an understanding of the experiences of adult learners engaged in distance learning in an Early Childhood Development programme at the South African College for Teacher Education.

4. ASSUMPTIONS AND PRESUPPOSITIONS

I have been a Senior Head of the Early Childhood Department at the South African College for Teacher Education for a few years and have gained the impression that students enrolled for distance education courses have many problems to cope with. Many students have written to me complaining that they receive their assignments late, or that they have received the wrong material or no material at all. It is my assumption that administrative personnel do not always understand the needs and expectations of distance learners. In addition, students have difficulty in reaching us by telephone as some live in remote areas where there are no telephone facilities. As a result, I am of the opinion that the communication between the lecturing staff and the students is not always efficient. Therefore, I have presupposed that students become frustrated and sometimes demotivated. I have also marked many assignments and have gained the impression that some students who study in their second language

have a language barrier to cope with. Consequently, I assumed that this language problem might influence their learning outcome. Furthermore, it is my assumption that lecturers do not always understand what the experiences and working conditions of adult distance learners are and that their assessment would be fairer if they understood the characteristics of the learners and their experiences. If our course design teams or the individuals who write study material were to understand the students' experiences, characteristics, needs and working conditions, as well as their diversity, their study material and examples would probably be more relevant to the students and the students would be more successful and would enjoy learning. Lastly, I also assumed that students would like to have a few contact sessions in which they could discuss problems with their lecturers, as well as with the other students.

5. REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

5.1 Introduction

As mentioned before, the aim of this research focuses on gaining an in-depth understanding of the experiences of adult learners engaged in distance learning in an Early Childhood Development programme at the South African College for Teacher Education. In order to place this aim within a theoretical framework, the literature on distance education, adult education and higher education was consulted.

In this review, I argue that distance learners have different experiences and needs to their full-time counterparts at conventional education institutions. The communication between the learner and the educator has to be facilitated by print or other technologies. Therefore, all role-players involved in the teaching of distance learners should understand the nature of distance education and the needs, characteristics and experiences of these learners. For this reason, I shall focus firstly on the term *distance education* and I shall also place this research in the South African distance learning context. Thereafter, the characteristics of the distance learner as adult, will be discussed. I shall then move on to the teaching of adult learners. As communication at the South African College for Teacher Education is mainly facilitated through the printed text, I shall conclude by investigating quality instructional design, which could influence students' learning experiences.

5.2 Literature-based clarification of the term “distance education”

I am in agreement with Moore and Kearsley (1996:1); De Wolf (in Tuijnman, 1996:638-645); Oosthuizen (1997:71) and Keegan (1996:38) when they assert that a fundamental concept of distance education is that students and educators are separated by distance and sometimes by time. Students and educators, who are not together at the same place and time, are separated by distance, and an artificial communication device is necessary to provide information and a channel of interaction between them. The primary source of communication between the learners and the educators is the use of print and other technologies. This is the most obvious characteristic that distinguishes distance education from other forms of education. Consequently, distance education courses have to be more carefully designed, planned and produced in order to ensure success.

In light of the above, I prefer to use the definition of distance education given by Moore and Kearsley (1996:2) for this research, and I quote:

Distance education is planned learning that normally occurs in a different place from teaching and as a result requires special techniques of course design, special instructional techniques, special methods of communication by electronic and other technology, as well as special organisational and administrative arrangements.

In the South African context, distance education has a major role to play in meeting the challenges of greater access and enhanced quality in the context of resource constraints and a diverse student body. Unfortunately, there are currently concerns about the efficacy, appropriateness and effectiveness of distance learning programmes in South Africa. Some of the concerns include inadequate learner support and a focus on correspondence-type programmes (Department of Education, 1996:13; Fraser in Steyn, 1994:37; Leamson, 1999:219). Therefore, I believe it is necessary to find ways of evaluating learning and instruction in order to improve distance learning programmes. In this research I have used interviews to understand the experiences of some distance learners engaged in a reception-year programme at the South African College for Teacher Education. The information gained could probably be used to improve course design, and the communication between learners and educators.

I shall now move on to discuss the adult learner engaged in distance learning.

5.3 The adult distance learner

The concept *adult* is socially constructed, which means that every society understands it differently. Furthermore, the status of adults is linked to the social roles they fill, as well as the extent to which they assume responsibility for their own lives. In addition, adult learners studying at a distance usually have multiple roles to fulfil and are therefore part-time learners. In many cultures, women students, in particular, find that part-time study adds another role to their busy schedule. It is therefore imperative that assignments and practical or tutor sessions are planned with these realities in mind (Perraton, 1993:401). For anyone designing or teaching a distance education course, it is also important to understand the characteristics of distance learners as adults: what affects their success, how they perceive distance learning, and what they expect from a distance learning programme (Moore & Kearsley, 1996:153). For this reason I shall now focus on these aspects.

5.3.1 Generalised characteristics of the adult learner

According to Gravett (1997:9), the three generalised characteristics of adult learners are: they bring accumulated experiences to the learning situation; learners are adult by definition; and adult learners are life-world and life-task oriented. These characteristics will now be clarified briefly in relation to the problem of the research as the scope of this essay does not allow for an in-depth study of them.

5.3.1.1 The learners are adults by definition

As discussed previously, the concept *adult* centres mainly on the life-situation of the adult. A related concept to *adult* is the concept *adulthood*, which is normative in nature. Aspects such as autonomy, responsibility and self-determination are generally perceived as being important attributes of adulthood. Since human beings grow and change, adulthood is never fully achieved. The adult distance educator, therefore, should promote independence, responsibility and self-directedness (Gravett, 1997:9). Unfortunately, most students in South Africa have probably been taught via the traditional approach, which Freire (1993:52) calls the *banking approach*, where they

were passive recipients of knowledge. They may even think that distance education courses are easier than conventional classes and entail less work. They do not understand that they have to take more responsibility for their own learning and cannot wait for an instructor to prompt them (Moore & Kearsley, 1996:166). Distance course material and instruction should therefore promote active student participation that results in students becoming independent and self-directed learners.

Candy (1991:251) states that learning is an active process of constructing meaning and transforming understanding. Furthermore, he holds that the constructivist view of learning, based on the individual construction of reality, is particularly congruent with the notion of self-direction. This viewpoint is echoed by Moore and Kearsley (1996:119,120) and Steyn (1994:39) when they assert that the ability to take responsibility for all or most of the design of one's own learning, and to make adjustments accordingly, is one of the attributes of being a self-directed learner. Students who have the ability to direct their own learning find distance learning easier than those who need an extraordinary degree of direction, encouragement and feedback. Most students fall in between these poles, and distance materials should therefore be designed to encourage and support self-directed learning, as well as to provide the degree of support needed by people at different stages of self-directedness. In light of the above, I agree with Moore and Kearsley (1996:166) and Cyr (1997:44, 45) that guidance and orientation sessions for students, as well as thoroughly prepared documents containing the necessary information on these issues, should be included in any distance education course. This would help students to find out how the delivery system in distance education works and what is expected of them.

5.3.1.2 Adult learners bring accumulated experiences with them into the educational situation

In the literature, the accumulated experiences of adult learners have been viewed as a major factor that distinguishes the adult learner from the child as learner (Merriam & Caffarella in Gravett, 1997:10). Adult learners link their accumulated experiences to new information during the learning process so that it can become personal knowledge. If these experiences are not acknowledged, adult learners may feel that they are not accepted as people (Gravett, 1997:10). Adults also bring established attitudes, patterns of thought and fixed ways of doing things to their learning that can

help them cope with new situations and ideas. At the same time, over-learned habits and strongly held beliefs can prevent learners from changing (Daines, Daines & Graham, 1993:5,6). For this reason, I claim that it is of the utmost importance to ascertain the distance learners' expectations and to negotiate the course structures and the learning processes with them through orientation sessions, workshops, interviews or questionnaires. In addition, adult distance learners' rich resources of knowledge and experience could also be used to improve or develop courses. In other words, when students' experiences are utilised in the learning process, they become co-constructors of knowledge (Holmberg, 1995:171; Shor, 1992:85).

5.3.1.3 Adult learners are life-world and life-task oriented

Houle, in Merriam and Brockett (1997:132), identifies in his classic study of participation, *The inquiring Mind*, three main orientations of the adult learner. The first orientation is that some adult learners are goal-oriented and participate in meeting specific objectives, others are activity-oriented with a need for personal growth, and then there are those who seek knowledge for its own sake because it interests them. Most learners, however, want to be able to apply what they have learnt immediately in their everyday lives (Gravett, 1997:8-13; Daines, Daines & Graham, 1993:6; Vella 1994:16; Leamson, 1999:36). For distance learners, studying is costly in terms of money, time and the work that will be added to their multiple roles. They therefore are usually highly motivated and task-oriented and want to experience an immediate impact on their life-worlds (Moore & Kearsley, 1996:154,163). As a result, they will most likely pay more attention to content, learning tasks and examples that are relevant to their life-situation.

5.4 Teaching adult learners via distance education

The main purpose of any teaching situation is to assist learners to learn. The effective adult educator guides the learning process and creates an atmosphere that is conducive to learning (Merriam & Brockett, 1997:150). Therefore, I now move on to the role of adult educators in a distance learning environment: how they can create a positive

learning environment and the different types of interaction that take place when learning at a distance.

5.4.1 The adult educator

I agree with Perraton (1993:1) that “good education demands good teachers”. Donaldson, Flannery and Ross-Gordon (in Imel, 1995:2) conducted an investigation on the attributes adult learners expected effective instructors to possess. The six most frequently mentioned attributes were knowledgeability, concern for student learning, clear presentation of material, ability to motivate, emphasis on relevant material and enthusiasm. These attributes are also applicable to the educator of the distance learner. Here I have combined the opinions of Marland (1997:75); Holmberg (1995: 129,171, 172); Perraton (1993:401); Naidoo (1996:86) and Steyn (1994:40) on the role of the distance educator. These authors maintain that distance educators with a commitment to open learning are likely to:

- value diversity in students by negotiating the course content with them;
- promote student independence and autonomy by catering for diversity in the ways in which students learn;
- believe that students are capable of directing and monitoring their own learning with appropriate support;
- motivate students to become self-directed, introspective and self-analytical of their learning;
- encourage intrinsic motivation;
- negotiate individual learning packages with students, including assessment tasks; provide different learning activities that students could use; use a range of media as appropriate (e.g. print, telephone, computer, satellite, interactive multimedia); and identify a range of resources;
- develop personal capacities for flexibility, including tolerance of diversity and negotiating and establishing rapport with students;
- gather data on the learning needs, styles and approaches of distance students, as well as the environments in which they work;
- address learners’ needs for linking theory and practice by applying what they have learnt in their life-worlds;

- strive to provide support for learners seeking to exploit open learning opportunities; monitor student progress frequently and individualise feedback to students;
- inspire deep learning strategies by using suitable types of assessment;
- use approaches conducive to problem-oriented learning; and
- utilise learners' accumulated experience in the learning process.

5.4.2 The learning environment and student support

The educator should do everything possible to establish an open, friendly, safe and caring environment that is conducive to learning (Vella, 1994:6). When learners first join a distance education institution, they find themselves in an unfamiliar situation. The adult distance learner has to adapt to an unknown learning environment, an unknown educator, unfamiliar study material and techniques, as well as feelings of loneliness (Greyling, 1992:29). For this reason, most distance learners experience anxiety and fear. The distance education provider should create a safe, caring environment by providing all the support the learner needs via the post, the telephone, the computer and other devices (Oosthuizen, 1997:71). According to Wiechers (in Oosthuizen, 1997:75), the first assignment fills the adult learner with trepidation. For this reason, the first assignment should be returned speedily with relevant and constructive feedback. The more experienced students become in distance learning, the less anxious they feel. Moore and Kearsley (1996:155) also mention that most adult learners experience a degree of anxiety about their ability to meet the expectations they have of themselves. Students who have succeeded in the past may be less anxious, but students who are unfamiliar with distance learning may experience a high degree of anxiety. The educator and tutor should reassure the students that failure and mistakes are a natural part of learning, that risk-taking is welcomed, and that effort and commitment are met with approval. Educators and tutors should convey the message that they want students to be successful.

According to a survey by St Pierre and Olsen in Moore and Kearsley (1996:147), factors that contributed to distance learners' satisfaction were the opportunity to apply knowledge and the prompt return of assignments. Conversations with the instructor, relevant course content and a good study guide also contributed to students' satisfaction. Moore and Kearsley (1996:168), as well as Daines, Daines and Graham

(1993:15), give the expectations that students have of a good course. Meeting these expectations could inform course design, as well as the nature of the teaching or tutoring involved and the student support service provided for adult distance learners. These expectations are:

- information that is up to date, relevant to their needs and authoritative on what and how to study;
- opportunities to do something with what they learn;
- feedback on their work and progress; and
- help dealing with administrative or personal problems related to the programme.

In connection with the last point made above, students experience frustration when trying to solve administrative problems via telephone, fax or correspondence. Educators should therefore ensure that students' study guides explain all these issues in detail. In addition, I concur with Steyn's (1994:37) and Leamson's (1999:175) viewpoints that all staff, academic and administrative, should understand and value the nature of distance education, as well as the needs of distance learners. All staff should attend an orientation programme on what distance education is like from the student's perspective, and in-service training should also be ongoing. Comments from interviews held with students and students' stories in print, and video recordings may also be used for this purpose.

5.4.3 Interaction and communication

As mentioned before, the role of an effective educator is to guide and assist learners to learn, that is, to construct meaning intentionally. When interacting and collaborating, the educator and the learners enter into dialogue and become co-constructors of knowledge (Gravett, 1997:22,23; Maimela, 1994:110). In distance education, the physical distance between educator and learner may lead to a communication gap and this is called a transactional distance. This separation actually dictates that educators plan, present content, interact and perform teaching activities in different ways from the face-to-face learning environment (Leamson, 1999:199,200). These educators have different roles to fill, such as presenting information for the learners to interact with, interacting with individual students to guide their learning and organising

interaction between learners to help them test and apply their knowledge. Moore and Kearsley (1996:127-132) identify three types of interaction: learner-content interaction; learner-instructor interaction; and learner-learner interaction. I shall now focus on these three types of interaction.

The first type of interaction is learner-content interaction. The educator has to initiate and assist the interaction of the student with the subject matter. Learners have to construct knowledge by means of a process of planned learning assisted by an educator or tutor (Moore & Kearsley, 1996:129). Learning should not be understood as a passive process with the learner as the object of teaching, but rather as an active process in which the learner interprets information and tries to link it to already existing knowledge and fit it into existing cognitive structures (Schuemer in Holmberg, 1995:32; Vella, 1994:11; Candy, 1991:251). The distance educator has to guide this process via the printed text and other technologies such as radio, videotape recordings and computer software. As educators cannot see how students react to the technology used, they should give students the confidence to use and test the technology.

The second type of interaction is learner-instructor interaction. This type of interaction is the dialogue between the instructor and the learner (Leamson, 1999:201). That is, after the content has been presented, instructors help the students to interact with it. They organise formal and informal assessment and evaluation to assess progress. Instructors also provide each learner with counselling, support and encouragement, though the extent and nature of the support varies according to the learners' educational level (Moore & Kearsley, 1996:129-131). This interaction may be through correspondence, teleconference, telephone or tutor sessions. Learners may then draw on the experience of the educator while interacting with the content in a manner the learner finds the most suitable. Leamson (1999:201) found that students who work in a foreign language are less likely to interact with the instructor than those who share the instructor's mother tongue. Therefore, educators should communicate a respectful awareness of the figures of speech, interests and values of their diverse student body (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995:114).

The third type of interaction takes place between the learners only, alone or in group settings, with or without the presence of an instructor. An example of this type of

interaction is the use of e-mail or computer conferencing, which can give students the advantages of individual interaction with the instructor, as well as interaction with their peer group. Students may also be given the contact numbers of fellow students who live in their area in order to form study groups, although they must give their permission for this (Moore & Kearsley, 1996:128-134).

5.5 Course design and development

“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?” ‘That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,’ said the Cat (Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland, Chapter 6).

In the light of this discussion on the adult distance learner with unique learning needs and expectations, it is clear that instructional designers should take cognisance of these needs when designing course material. Berg, Van Wyk, Lemmer, Van der Linde and Van Niekerk (1996:171) conducted qualitative research on distance learners in South Africa and their experience of text. The researchers found that personal circumstances, limited proficiency in English, and certain textual features such as access devices and in-text activities appeared to influence the way in which students approach text. Students also professed that they prefer content that encourages critical thinking. The researchers came to the conclusion that educators should understand the learners’ background circumstances, their learning strategies, reading skills, and their need for understanding and interpreting text through active participation. Furthermore, they proposed that a team should ideally develop distance education material. Moore and Kearsley (1996:101) also propose that distance learning material should be developed by a team. In most cases, however, the subject matter expert writes the first draft of the study guide and an editor produces the final document. Van der Merwe (1994:22,23) feels that course designers should follow a more student-centred approach by addressing the totality of the students’ learning experiences. There should be a balance between the students’ needs and the educators’ academic expectations.

According to Moore and Kearsley (1996:101), the development of instructional material can be divided into different phases. In the analysis phase, the educator or organisation should conduct a task analysis to identify the skills needed for the task, the characteristics of the learners, the learning environment and what the learners need

to learn in order to perform a specific skill at a specific level. The next phase is the design phase where the goals and objectives of the instructional programme are written, and the structure and format of the course decided on. For criterion reference evaluation, test items that match the objectives, as well as suitable media, can be selected. Then follows the development stage, when instructional material, such as study guides and videos, are created, produced and tested. The next stage is the implementation stage during which students register, instructional materials are delivered and instructors interact with students. Evaluation activities involve the testing and grading of students and the assessment of the instructional effectiveness of the course and materials. The last step usually leads to the revision of courses and materials.

Aspects that should be kept in mind when developing study guides are that they should be organised into self-contained units that provide structure for the student. Self-assessment tasks for each unit and activities that apply the theory or promote critical thinking, may also be included in each unit. Study guides should be written in a conversational tone, using the first person and a simple vocabulary. Clarifying difficult concepts, presenting personal anecdotes or examples, commenting on points of disagreement with the text or readings, or raising questions for students to consider, all help to establish a more conversational tone in the study guide (Holmberg, 1995:76-78). Rowntree (in Holmberg, 1995:91) provides the following principles for writing study material: write plainly, cut out surplus words, use short, familiar words, use strong active verbs, use specialist vocabulary with care and write short, simple sentences.

5.5.1 Creating student involvement

Regardless of what type of distance education is being designed, student involvement is of enormous importance. In recorded materials, such as the printed study guide or audio- or videotapes, the student should be presented with questions, problems or other activities to respond to at the end of each unit or throughout the presentation (Bergh, Van Wyk, Lemmer, Van der Linde & Van Niekerk, 1996:171). Most students will take advantage of these activities to check their understanding of the course material. Moreover, students should receive feedback on their assignments or they

will fail to develop a sense of participation in the course. Most students prefer prompt, constructive and focused feedback (Moore & Kearsley, 1996:119). Lack of sufficient feedback is one of the most common sources of dissatisfaction and frustration for distance learners (Van der Merwe, 1994:22). Most distance education courses include assignments that have to be submitted on a regular basis throughout the course. This structure serves to provide students with feedback on progress and to pace them. The setting of assignments with deadlines motivates students to keep up with the work. Instructional designers should, however, be careful not to overload the learners with too many assignments. Greyling (1992:59,60) and Steyn (1999:34,35) mention that assessment criteria should be clearly stated, and that self-assessment activities should be included to help students to monitor their progress. I am in agreement with the view of Steyn (1994:40) that students and educators do not always see assignments as the ultimate communication medium that they should be.

Cole, Coats and Lentell in Moore and Kearsley (1996:149) identified the expectations of students in terms of grading and feedback on assignments, as being fair and objective grading, to have their work treated with respect and to be given an explanation and justification for the grade awarded. They also expect a clear indication of how they could improve, both in terms of specific responses to questions and in general, as well as encouragement and reassurance on their ability and progress. Furthermore, they expect constructive criticism and advice, an opportunity to respond if desired and a timely response from the educators. Although meeting these expectations is time-consuming, it is where most interaction takes place in a distance education course.

Apart from assignments, all other assessment practices should cater for the diverse student body by varying the assessable activities. The educator and the learners should negotiate methods that suit the needs and interests of different learners (Marland, 1997:72). Assessment practices should also demand that critical thinking and deep learning take place because, if students are used to assessment based on memory recall, they tend to do surface reading (Holmberg, 1995:34). Biggs in Morgan, Dingsdag and Saenger (1998:143), describes surface approaches as characterised by a focus upon the literal, concrete, lower-order skills, such as rote learning, and the

paring down of tasks to the bare essentials. Deep learning involves activities that focus on the underlying meaning of the text.

5.5.2 Didactic conversation

Holmberg made an extensive contribution to distance education with his theory that distance education material should differ from other textbooks in that it should have an interactive conversational style (Keegan, 1996:97). Distance learning materials that are developed along the lines of Holmberg's didactic conversation would present the following characteristics:

- easily accessible presentations of study material: clear language, written in a style that is easily readable and with a moderate density of information;
- explicit advice and suggestions for the student as to what to do and what to avoid, what to pay particular attention to and consider, with reasons provided;
- invitations to an exchange of views, to question, to make judgements of what is to be accepted and what is to be rejected;
- attempts to involve the student emotionally so that he or she takes a personal interest in the subject and its problems; and
- a personal style, including the use of the personal and possessive pronouns.

5.5.3 General design principles

Students who are privileged enough to have quality course material are more likely to experience success and enjoy learning. Although there are different design considerations associated with the various types of distance education, Moore and Kearsley (1996:122,123) and Van Niekerk and Herman (1994:51) identify some general principles that apply to all of them:

- Good structure: The organisation of the course and the materials should be well defined and clear to the student; there should be internal consistency between the different parts of the course. Students should always be aware of what they are trying to learn, what they are expected to achieve by the learning, and when they have arrived at the goal.

- Clear course aims and objectives or outcomes: If a course has clear objectives or outcomes, the task of the instructors in identifying suitable learning experiences becomes fairly simple and evaluation is easy.
- Small units: The content of the course and the way the materials are organised should be broken down and presented in small units. These could correspond with a single objective, outcome or learning activity.
- User-friendly: The instructional material should be user-friendly (see remarks made on Rowntree's proposals on writing instructional material and Holmberg's ideas on a didactic conversation).
- Planned participation: Opportunities for interaction, through student activities or exercises, should be embedded in the course and the materials.
- Completeness: The course materials or programme should contain extensive commentary or examples like those that would be provided, often extemporaneously, in a traditional classroom setting.
- Repetition: Important ideas should be repeated periodically (especially in summaries) to provide reinforcement and to compensate for distractions and memory limitations.
- Synthesis: Important ideas expressed in the materials or contributed by students should be woven together (especially summaries).
- Inclusion: Reading lists and bibliographies should be included.
- Stimulation: Through the use of interesting formats, course materials should capture and hold the attention of students. According to Marland (1997:107-111), access devices that could hold students' attention and cater for their diverse needs are: tables of contents, objectives or outcomes, in-text questions, glossaries, chapter titles, headings of various sizes, summaries, typographical cues such as bold type to indicate significance and diagrams of the text structure.
- Variety: Information should be presented in a number of different formats. Different examples and different media should be used to appeal to the varying interests and backgrounds of the students.
- Open-ended: Assignments, examples and problems should be open-ended so that they allow the students to adapt the content to their own interests or situations.
- Balance: There should be a proper balance between theory and practice. A practical approach to teaching the subject material should be followed.

- Feedback: Students should receive regular feedback on their assignments and progress in order to improve their understanding of the content.
- Continuous evaluation: The effectiveness of the materials, media and instructional methods should be routinely assessed using a variety of methods.

Van Niekerk and Herman (1994:43), as well as Van der Merwe (1994:24), concur with the last point made when they propose that educators and course developers should use the students' experiences of the course to help them redesign it and improve the instructional material. The design, development and implementation of the courses and material should be constantly evaluated to ensure effectiveness. Data can be collected in many ways, including observation, questionnaires and interviews (Moore & Kearsley, 1996:120). In this research I used interviews to find out about the experiences of learners engaged in distance learning.

5.6 Conclusion

As the research question that guided this study focused on gaining an in-depth understanding of the experiences of adult learners engaged in distance learning, I deemed it necessary to firstly discuss the nature of distance education. In distance education, adult learners do not have the direct support of an educator, and communication is facilitated by print or other technologies. Adult learners, therefore, have special needs and experiences that distance education providers should take cognisance of. Distance education providers should realise that distance learning requires special techniques of course design, special instructional techniques, special methods of communication by electronic and other technology, as well as special organisational and administrative arrangements. Consequently, the second issue discussed was the characteristics of the adult distance learner. Thirdly, I focused on the teaching of adult distance learners. This aspect included the role of the educator, how he or she could create a positive learning environment and the three types of interaction initiated by the educator. Lastly, I focused on the main aspects of effective instructional design, which could facilitate active participation in the learning process. I argue that distance learners will experience enjoyment and success when everyone involved understands the above-mentioned aspects of distance learning.

6. RESEARCH STRATEGY AND METHODS

6.1 Research paradigm

A paradigm may be viewed as “ a set of basic beliefs that deals with ultimates or first principles. It represents a *world view* that defines, for its holder, the nature of the ‘world’, the individual’s place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts. The beliefs are basic in the sense that they must be accepted simply on faith (however well argued); there is no way to establish their ultimate truthfulness” (Guba & Lincoln, 1998:200). In other words, research paradigms are basic belief systems that serve as a philosophical framework and guide the researcher in the choice of methods.

This research was informed by the socio-constructivist paradigm. Within the socio-constructivist paradigm it is argued that multiple realities are socially constructed by individuals (Guba & Lincoln in Denzin & Lincoln, 1998:240). Furthermore, within this paradigm, the researcher and the respondent investigated are believed to be interactively linked and the findings are created as the research proceeds. Thus, the researchers are participants as well as facilitators of the process, facilitating the construction of their own constructions and those of the other participants (Guba & Lincoln in Denzin & Lincoln, 1998:195-219). As my research was constructed within the socio-constructivist paradigm, I used qualitative methods of inquiry as these methods are usually the ones preferred within the constructivist paradigm.

Qualitative methods focus on understanding people’s constructions of reality and require a data collection instrument that is sensitive to underlying meaning when collecting and analysing data. Humans are best equipped for this task because interviewing, observing and analysing are activities central to qualitative research (Merriam, 1998:1,2). Therefore, as these methods corresponded with the aim of my research, I used them to explore and interpret the constructions of participants through interaction and active participation from the participants and myself. The method that I used to gather data was interviews. As qualitative research focuses on process, meaning and understanding, the product of qualitative research is richly descriptive. Consequently, as I used qualitative research methods for this research, a rich description of data in the form of the participant’s own words and direct citations from

documents are included in this study (see Appendix F). I tell a few personal “stories” and draw out implications from them that are appropriate for distance education practices, moving from the personal to the practical (Silverman, 2000:14).

In this research I assumed the posture of indwelling, which means that I tried to walk a mile in the other person’s shoes and attempted to experience the world in a similar way to the participant. Maykut and Morehouse (1994:25,26) hold the opinion that researchers understand the participants in a tacit way, that is, indirectly through indwelling. My task as researcher was to find patterns within the words of the participants and to present those patterns for others to inspect while trying to stay as close to the construction of the world as the participants originally experienced it (Maykut & Morehouse 1994:18).

6.2 Sampling and context of data selection

I used purposive sampling in my inquiry. This means that I purposefully selected 10 participants for inclusion based on the possibility that each participant would expand the variability of the sample (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994:45). I obtained the list of learners enrolled for the reception year course from SACTE’s administration section. This list contained information on the students’ age, qualifications, home language and the province in which they are situated. Maximum variation sampling was used in the selection to represent the widest possible range of experiences. This means that adult learners from diverse backgrounds and provinces were chosen, including Afrikaans, English, Indian and North Sotho learners from the Northern Province, Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal. For most of the students, the medium of instruction was in their second language. The level of these students’ academic experience varied from Grade 12 to diplomats. Furthermore, their ages varied from 20 to 49 years, which implies various levels of experience (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994:59). As redundancy is the primary criterion when the purpose is to maximise information, the number of participants decreased from ten to nine during the investigation (Merriam, 1998:64).

6.3 Data collection methods

6.3.1 Interviews

The data of qualitative research are usually the words and actions of people. Therefore research methods should be used that capture language and behaviour (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994:46). For this reason, I used semi-structured interviews as a data collection method. An interview is “a form of discourse where the conversation moves beyond surface talk to a discussion on thoughts and feelings” (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994:80). For this reason, I indwelled in the participants’ constructions of reality and attempted to come to an in-depth understanding of their experiences as distance learners at SACTE.

Before I could conduct interviews, however, a letter was sent to participants informing them of the inquiry and requesting their consent to include them in it (see Appendix C). The interviews were conducted only after written consent had been received (see Appendix D). All possible ethical considerations were addressed to protect the participants (refer to par. 6.6 for more detail). I used the following documents as background information in order to interpret the interviews meaningfully: the four manuals designed for the programme, the tutorial letters written to the students, the video that was produced for the programme and the students’ written assignments with the lecturers’ responses and memorandums (Merriam, 1998:113). Furthermore, I piloted an interview to try out my questions after which some of my questions were amended. I then conducted the interviews, which were audiotaped and later transcribed for use in data analysis. This was the beginning of an audit trail that was aimed at contributing to the trustworthiness of the research outcomes (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994:85). The interviews were semi-structured and the interview schedule contained several specific questions that I wanted to ask everyone. They also contained some questions that were more open-ended and that could be followed up with probes (Merriam, 1998:77-85).

Interview schedule

The categories of enquiry that were addressed during the interviews were as follows: Experiences of the written text, video recording, practical sessions, assessment

methods, learner support, the learning environment, as well as learners' future needs and expectations. The questions were compiled using Moore and Kearsley's (1996:9) systems model for distance education as a basis, as well as Patton's (1998:299-329); Merriam's (1998:77-81) and Maykut and Morehouse's (1994: 88-96) discussions on questions for interviewing.

The following open-ended questions were included:

1. What is your current occupation?
2. Can you describe to me in not more than three sentences why you have enrolled for the reception year course?
3. Describe your experiences of the tutorial letters sent to you.
4. How did you feel when you opened the study manuals and read the instruction in the tutorial letter for the first time?
5. How do you experience the written text at this point in time?
6. How do you experience the language of the written text?
7. How did you experience the learning tasks that you had to complete while reading the text?
8. What did the self-assessment tasks at the end of each unit mean to you in the learning process?
9. When you saw the video, what were you thinking?
10. Describe your experiences of the practical session you had with the lecturers.
11. What was your reaction when you read the lecturer's feedback on your assignment?

12. What are your experiences of the return back time of assignments?
13. Can you tell me how you felt when you contacted a staff member for support?
14. Describe your experiences of the administrative support you receive from SACTE.
15. Suppose I was a new person who was just entering this programme, and I asked you what I should do to really do well. What would you tell me?
16. What do you think an ideal programme should look like?
17. What would you change in the programme if you were to design it?
18. How do you feel about the fact that the practical session was changed to February?

6.4 Data analysis



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Qualitative data analysis is a process of making sense out of the data (Merriam, 1998: 193). Maykut and Morehouse (1994:121) views qualitative data analysis as the examination of people's words and actions. As a result, I used the constant comparative method to construct meaning from the qualitative data. This implied that there was a continuous comparison of the information retrieved from the interviews and documents. This led to category coding (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994:127-143). Data collection and data analysis were done simultaneously, that is, data analysis was done after each interview. Data analysis was completed when the data had been saturated, which implied that no new information could be retrieved from the data (Merriam, 1998:156-197). For more information on the data analysis process, refer to Section 7.

6.5 Validity and reliability

The research was conducted in an ethical manner to ensure validity and reliability. Validity and reliability are concerns that should be approached carefully when

choosing the research problem and the methods for collecting, analysing, interpreting and finally presenting data (Merriam, 1998:198-200).

Internal validity

Internal validity, according to Merriam (1998:201) deals with the question of how congruent research findings are with reality. I aimed to enhance the internal validity of this research by providing a thick, information-rich description of the research process and, for this I used the six basic strategies that Merriam (1998:204) proposes. Firstly, I used interviews as a data collection method to understand the underlying meaning of the respondents' experiences. Then I did a member check by asking the participants if the results were plausible. Furthermore, I gathered data over a period of time and asked colleagues to comment on the findings as they emerged. I also involved the participants in all the phases of the study, and clarified my assumptions and philosophical framework at the outset of the inquiry (Merriam, 1998: 201-204).

Reliability

Reliability generally refers to the extent to which research findings can be repeated with the same results (Merriam, 1998:205). This is not possible when one works from a constructivist perspective as there is no single reality but multiple realities. Lincoln and Guba in Merriam (1998:206) suggest that reliability in qualitative research should rather be to determine whether the results are consistent with the data collected. I therefore aimed at ensuring that the results of my study were consistent with the data collected by presenting a rich, thick description of the research strategy with supporting examples of an interview (see Appendix F), and an assignment and portfolio of a participant. I also used the techniques that Merriam (1998:206) proposes researchers use to ensure reliability. Firstly, I explained my socio-constructivist orientation towards the study (refer to par. 6.1). I then explained my credibility in conducting the research. As I am currently a lecturer at a distance education institution, my interest in the experiences of adult learners when engaged in distance learning is obvious. Next, I used purposive sampling with maximum variation so as to represent the widest possible range of experience. I collected the documents from a reliable source, that is, SACTE's administration section (see Appendix B), and I personally conducted the interviews. In this study I aimed at establishing an audit trail

by explaining in detail how data were collected, how categories were derived and how decisions were made throughout the inquiry (Merriam, 1998:206,207). In addition, I agree with Silverman (1998:185), who states that reliability can be increased by the fact that the tapes and transcriptions used in interviews can be inspected by the reader as well as the researcher.

External validity

According to Merriam (1998:207), external validity is “concerned with the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations, that is, how generalisable the results of a study are”. Guba and Lincoln in Merriam (1998:207) argue that in order to even discuss external validity, the study must be internally valid. For some time, qualitative researchers have debated the possibility that the findings of one study could be applied to other situations. Nevertheless, the qualitative researcher is obliged to provide a detailed description of the research project so as to enable readers to compare the “fit” with their own situations (Merriam, 1998:211). Bearing this in mind, I provided a thick and rich description so that readers could determine how closely their situation matched the research situation. Cronbach et al (in Patton, 1990:489) uses the term extrapolation rather than generalisation. Extrapolations are modest speculations on the likely applicability of findings to other situations under similar, but not identical, conditions. This is why I have endeavoured to provide information-rich data in order to keep the stakeholder’s desire for extrapolation in mind (Patton, 1998:489).

6.6 Ethical considerations

Merriam (1998:213) states that ethical dilemmas often emerge with regard to data collection and dissemination of findings. For this reason, I wrote a letter to the Rector of SACTE requesting permission to conduct interviews with students registered at SACTE and to disseminate the information gained to the Rand Afrikaans University and the South African College for Teacher Education (see Appendix A). Documents such as assignments were collected and students gave their consent for them to be used for the research (see Appendix D).

Patton (1990:356) gives some ethical and reactivity issues which I dealt with in designing and implementing this qualitative study. One of these issues was *promises and reciprocity*. I promised the interviewees that they could contact me if they had any problems concerning their study and that they could have a copy of the findings if they so wished. These promises have been kept. The next issue was *risk assessment*. I made sure that the participation of the learners in the interview did not put them at risk as a result of psychological stress, legal liabilities and so forth. Before I commenced with the interviews I made sure that they felt at ease and knew what was going to happen. *Confidentiality* was another issue. I made sure that reasonable confidentiality was kept. I used pseudonyms when quoting their comments so that their identity was protected (see Appendix F). The background information that I requested from the students (see Appendix E) was also used with the utmost care and confidentiality during the research report. The next issue was *informed consent*. I wrote a letter to each participant explaining how the interview would be conducted and how confidentiality would be handled (see Appendix C). I only conducted the interviews after I had received their written consent (see Appendix D). Another issue was *data access and ownership*. I explained carefully to the participants in the letter that the data would be open to public scrutiny (see Appendix C).

7. PRESENTATION OF THE DATA

Maykut and Morehouse (1994:121) view qualitative data analysis as “fundamentally a nonmathematical analytical procedure that involves examining the meaning of people’s words and actions”. In this research I have used the constant comparative method to construct meaning from the data. The constant comparative method implies that incidents from the interviews and documents are constantly compared until relevant categories are constructed (Maykut & Moorehouse, 1994:127-143; Merriam, 1998:178). These categories should reflect the purpose of the research.

I followed the process of data analysis in conjunction with data collection as Merriam (1994:180,181) proposes. Therefore, after I had conducted the first interview with Annie, I read the transcript several times in order to find units of data, that is, bits of information as described by Merriam (1998:179). After finding these units of meaning, I drew a line under each to separate them from each other, and a word or phrase was written in the left-hand margin to bring forth the meaning of the unit. An

example of such a unit of meaning is Annie's words, "...*Hihi (lag verleë), ek was baie opgewonde en nuuskierig, maar ek was ook benoud en onseker of ek dit gaan kan doen want dit is baie werk ... hihi (lag verleë).*" The words written in the margin that contained the essence of the unit were *excitement* and *fear*. Each unit of meaning was coded according to the page where it could be found in the transcript. An example of such a code is T/AK-1. The (T) refers to the transcript and the (AK) to the participant, Annie Kempen, while

the (1) refers to page one. Thereafter, I photocopied the coded transcript. I then cut out all the units from the photocopied transcript and pasted them onto A5 size index cards. I transferred these words to a discovery sheet where I began to look for recurring words, phrases and topics that could possibly be categorised together. In order to focus the data analysis on the research problem, I placed the research aim in the middle of the discovery sheet. Ten provisional categories emerged from this exercise. These categories are:

- Goal oriented
- Immediacy
- Language barrier
- Activities
- Self-assessment
- Accumulated experiences
- Need for contact sessions
- Frustration with administration
- Uncertainty as to what the study entails
- Excitement

Each of these provisional categories was written on index cards and I selected the unit cards that could possibly fit under these provisional categories by constantly using the *look/feel-alike* criteria as described by Maykut and Morehouse (1994:137,138). When six to seven data cards had been grouped together using the look/feel-alike criteria, I reread them in order to find the meaning they conveyed, and to write a rule that would serve as a basis for including or excluding the data cards in the category. Lincoln and Guba in Maykut & Morehouse (1994:139) suggest that these rules of inclusion be written as a propositional statement that conveys the meaning contained in the data cards clustered together under a category name. Each data card was reread to

determine whether it fitted the category rule, whether it should be categorised elsewhere or whether it could form a basis for a new category. I analysed the rest of the interviews in a similar fashion by constantly comparing the data and refining the categories. Then I placed the categories and their unit cards in envelopes. Thereafter, I computerised the provisional categories and the rules for inclusion. An example of these data cards and rules of inclusion is displayed in Table 7.1.

The next step I followed was to examine the propositional statements closely and to determine which propositions were more likely to contribute to my focus of inquiry. I systematically combined propositions that were related, left propositions that could stand alone and formulated outcome statements for each category as seen in Table 8.1. Maykut and Morehouse (1994:144) refer to the propositions that stand alone and to the propositions that are formed by connecting two or more other propositions as *outcome propositions*. These outcome propositions formed the basis of the findings.

I have attempted to maintain an audit trail by systematically coding the data to the categories and have collected direct quotations to illustrate the outcomes. Furthermore, I have prioritised the outcomes according to their importance in contributing to the focus of inquiry. I selected four to five excerpts from the data to illustrate the outcome propositions (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994:157-160). These rich details of human experience were used to write up the findings of this research, which will now be discussed.

Table 7.1 Provisional categories and subcategories with units of meaning and the rule for inclusion

CATEGORY	RULE FOR INCLUSION
<p>1. Experiencing excitement and fear of failure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excitement and fear • Learners do not know what distance learning requires of them 	<p>Learners experience excitement as well as fear of failure at the outset of the course</p> <p>T/AK-1 Hihi (lag verlee), ek was baie opgewonde en nuuskierig maar ek was ook benoud en onseker of ek dit gaan kan doen want dit is baie werk ... hihi (lag verlee).</p> <p>T/LS-1 Ek was baie opgewonde gewees, want dit het van my ma hulle se kant gekom wat se dit is daar, en toe kon ek nie meer wag dat dit hier moet kom nie. Toe ek dit oopmaak toe dink ek aaaa, uiteindelik kan ek begin. (Lag)</p> <p>T/MR-1 For the first time, the day when I opened it, I was so surprised because the file was so big and I didn't know I was going to start and finish. But to my surprise the time I opened my file the language was being so simple that I can understand everything, I was so happy.</p> <p>T/SG-1 Bang. Nee, nee, dis nie oor wat ek sou wou gehad het, ek het net nie geweet wat verwag hulle regtig van my, omdat ek nog nooit so iets gedoen het nie. Maar ek het dit geniet tot nou.</p>

T/MM-1

0000Opening the manual for the first time, I was surprised, it was ... it was a big thing and I thought I am going to work a lot on it. I have got to give myself a lot of chance to read and to answer the questions so I knew that I have got to give myself a lot of chance on this book, it was so big and I was surprised. I thought how am I going to answer these questions, will I know the questions, will I know everything that is inside but I tried to give myself a lot of time on it.

T/ZA-1

I was lost. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know where to get the information from, quite honestly, and as I read through it, a lot of it was familiar to me because of my experience with Horizon and then I sat back for a week and I said no, it cannot be so strange, and then I went back and read it and then I said there is something in here I can do.

T/ER-1

Ek moet eerlik sê dat ek sien dis nogal baie werk, toe ek besef dis nie net van koop... en klaar nie... Partykeer was ek onseker gewees.

8. FINDINGS AND A DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

8.1 Introduction

The focus of the research reported on in this essay was to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of adult learners engaged in distance learning. Therefore, the questions asked in the interviews helped me, as a qualitative researcher, to “indwell” that is, to attempt to walk a mile in the participants’ shoes and experience the world in a similar way (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994:18). These experiences were transcribed and analysed, and categories were constructed. Furthermore, as explained in the previous section, outcome propositions were formulated for each category and were prioritised by considering their importance in contributing to the focus of inquiry and their prominence in the data.

I will now discuss each category and subcategory using the quotations from the interviews that best illustrate the outcome propositions. By weaving together the outcome propositions and the illustrative data, the intention is for the findings to be an informative narrative of people’s thoughts, feelings and experiences (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994:159). I will also refer to relevant literature extracted from Section 5.

Table 8.1: Table of categories and subcategories and their outcome statements derived from the process of data analysis

Category and subcategory	Outcome statement
<p>1. Experiencing excitement and fear of failure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learners do not know what distance learning entails • Administrative support 	<p>The participants experienced excitement at the outset of the course, but also feared the unknown world of distance learning. Most of them did not realise that it requires a great deal of hard work. In addition, problems with administrative support lead to frustration.</p>

<p>2. Immediacy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Video • Multiple roles, time constraint • Goal oriented 	<p>The participants enjoyed the video because they could apply the ideas they derived from it immediately to their working environment. They have many roles so it is essential for them to organise their study time. For this reason they prefer material that is related to their life-world. As they are goal oriented, they want to use what they have learnt in their work situation or to be able to apply it immediately or in the near future.</p>
<p>3. Learner-content interaction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active learner involvement • Self-directed learning • Language barrier • Use experience to improve the course 	<p>While involved in the learning process, the participants found that, through the activities, they were able to assess whether or not they understood the content. This active involvement made them feel that they could direct their own learning. They also felt that, when the language of instruction is not their mother tongue, concepts should be explained to them, and some felt that it would help if this were done in their mother tongue. Students had valuable ideas for improving the course.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learner-tutor interaction • Tutorial letters • Telephone conversations and visits • Contact sessions • First assignment 	<p>The participants felt that the tutorial letters guided them in the learning process, and said that communication with their lecturers gives them great encouragement. Furthermore, they agree that contact sessions would help them with their studies, as they would meet the</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback from lecturers, timing • Portfolio versus assignment 	<p>lecturers and the other learners to interact and discuss the work.</p> <p>Participants found that the first assignment made them very nervous, as they did not know whether they were on the right track. However, after the feedback on it they felt motivated to continue. After they had read the feedback, they had a better understanding of the work and the areas in which they could improve. They also enjoyed the portfolio more than the assignment as it relates to their working environment and is more practically oriented.</p>
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8.2 Discussion of findings



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8.2.1 Experiencing excitement and fear of failure

The adult distance learners interviewed in this research had mixed feelings at the outset of the course. Although they were very excited, they were also anxious that they might not be able to succeed. As one participant Lisa said: “*Ek was baie opgewonde en nuuskierig, maar ek was ook benoud en onseker of ek dit gaan kan doen want dit is baie werk ...*” Zola said: “*I was lost. I didn't know what to do.*”

These findings are in line with Moore and Kearsley's (1996:155) view that most adult learners experience a degree of anxiety about their ability to meet the expectations they have of themselves.

Furthermore, students experienced anxiety because they were unsure as to what distance learning really entails. They had not been offered any introductory sessions for discussing distance learning or for meeting the lecturers or other students. As a result, when they received the modules, they felt overwhelmed by the amount of work to be done. Some of them said that they thought initially that distance courses were

easier than full-time courses and required less work. Ella mentioned that: *“Ek moet eerlik sê dat dis nogal baie werk, toe besef ek dis nie net van koop ... en klaar nie.”* Lina said: *“Dit gaan nie noodwendig as jy deur die pos doen, dis makliker ... Dis toe nie so maklik soos ek gedink het en soos almal vir my gesê het nie, want dit is regtig baie meer werk as wat as jy jou elke dag instel jy gaan elke dag klas toe, jy kry ‘n gedeelte werk gedoen ...”*

Students experienced the administrative staff as very friendly and willing to help, although their problems usually took a long time to be solved. Two of the participants had to go and fetch their study material themselves after they had been promised that they would receive it through the post. This demotivated the students and made them anxious and frustrated as the first assignment was due to be submitted. The students' frustrations with administrative problems were one of the assumptions I made before commencing with the research and it is confirmed by the following comments of the students. Sarie stated the following: *“Ek was gefrustreerd gewees, ek het amper – ek het op ‘n tyd gesê, sjoe, maar dis treurig, regtig, en toe het my man gery en hy het dit vir my gaan haal.”* Another student Ella said: *“Ek was effens teleurgesteld oor die portfolio want jy moet dit hê om te kan sien om jou werksopdragte te kan voltooi, dan kan jy nog langer vat om jou werk te voltooi ... Jy mors tyd.”* This tallies with the views of Leamson (1999:175) and Steyn (1994:37) that administrative problems lead to frustration. They feel that students, academic and administrative staff should understand the nature of distance education as well as the needs of the learners. This knowledge could lead to an atmosphere that is conducive to learning, and that minimises anxiety and fear.

8.2.2 Immediacy

Vella (1994:16) states that most recent research acknowledges that adult learners need to see the immediate usefulness of new learning, that is, the knowledge, skills or attitudes they are working to acquire. This viewpoint was emphasised by most of the participants when they said that they did not have time to waste and wanted their studies to make a difference now. The reception year programme that the participants enrolled for includes a video in the study package. This video illustrates the daily programme by using different pre-school settings. On viewing the video, the students reacted very positively. They felt that it brought them closer to a real-life situation and that they understood some of the work better after viewing it. Zola's comment on the

video was: *"You would have to visualise everything, so it made it very much simpler to really see them apply what we have read, apply that in the class situation."* Furthermore, some of them have already applied what they have seen in the video in their classes. Maggie described her experiences as follows: *"Seeing the video – I saw myself in the pre-school and then realised it was going to teach me a lot and it is going to help me going through the assignment because everything is described in the video. I tried to change some of the activities."* Mary said: *"For the video was so nice for me to look at because it made me happy in such a way that I was able to go back to my classroom and do some changes from the video."* Sarie felt that more videos could be used in the course as they make distance learning more interesting. She said: *"There is a lot of reading material, I think add a little bit more of the video, more of those. It is a break away from so much reading. I think it just – your mind just switches off and then if you put on that video. I think you are actually looking at it in a real situation, a real class situation and then you come back to your notes and it seems much easier."* These responses lend credence to the claims made by Marland (1997:75) that distance educators with a commitment to open learning would use a range of media to cater for diversity in the ways in which students learn.

Most participants say that they have many roles to fill, so felt it was essential for them to organise their study time. For this reason they prefer material that is related to their work situation. Zola explained her many roles and time constraints by saying: *"I thought I would never do it, because now you have to programme your mind to say I have to do this, now sit down and concentrate and I cannot do it at any time that I wish. My switch off time is 8pm and that is when I have to go back and do this when everybody passes out and is seen to."* Mary explained her different roles as follows: *"With the study and assignment for you to be able to go through, is to give yourself a plan for how and when you are going to give yourself chance to read, chance to relax and chance to be able to do some task."* These findings concur with the views of Gravett (1997:9,10) and Perraton (1993:401) that adult learners have multiple roles to fill, that they need to manage their time carefully and therefore need relevant study material. As a result, they want to be able to apply what they learn immediately to their work situation.

All the students interviewed mentioned that they studied for career development purposes and would like to reach their goal with immediate effect or as soon as

possible. Lisa explained that it has been a dream of hers since childhood: *“Dit was nogal ’n groot droom gewees van my van kleintyd af. Die grootste rede.”* Ella said: *“Dis basies om te leer en die kinders beter te verstaan en ... onderrig makliker te maak.”* Suzy felt that she wanted to know more about pre-school learners and said that she would like to start her own pre-school one day. She said: *“Ek het eerstens vir die kursus ingeskryf omdat ek self kinders op die ouderdom het en graag meer omtrent hulle wil leer en ook omdat ek eendag beplan om self ’n kleuterskool oop te maak en eers ondervinding daarvan self wil opdoen.”* The students’ responses are substantiated by the statement made by Houle, in Merriam and Brockett (1997:132), that most adult learners are highly motivated and task-oriented. Therefore, they want to experience the immediate usefulness of their new learning (Vella in Gravett, 1997:13).

8.2.3 Learner-content interaction

While involved in the learning process, the participants found that, through the “stop and think” activities included in the text, they were able to assess whether or not they understood the content. This active involvement made them feel that they could direct their own learning. Lina explained what she thought of the “stop and think” activities when she said: *“Ek dink dit bring jou baie dat jy die heelyd aktief betrokke is by die leer werk. ... As jy nie lekker verstaan het, kan jy altyd terug gaan en wêre daardeur gaan en dan jou goedjies beantwoord. So ek voel dat dit is baie leersaam omdat jy die heelyd betrokke is.”* Anna declared: *“Okay, dit is baie oulik, dit laat mens dink of jy verstaan wat jy gelees het.”* Zola felt that the “stop and think” activities *“really helped you to stop and think ... and then you can apply that. It is like a breakaway from the reading, so it does help you to focus maybe on the one specific topic.”* These findings are supported by the views of Vella (1994:11); Scheumer in Holmberg (1995:32) and Candy (1991:251) that learning is an active process in which the learners construct their own reality, interpret new information and try to link it to existing knowledge. Vella’s view (1994:11) that adult learners learn by doing is echoed in Lina’s statement: *“Ek dink dit bring jou baie dat jy die heelyd aktief betrokke is by die leer werk.”*

The participants felt that the self-assessment activities at the end of each unit helped them to test their understanding of the content. Anna said: *“Oo...Okay. Goed. Dit laat jou dink wat het jy geleer en of jy dit verstaan.”* Maggie commented: *“Looking at this*

book, I realised that it is going to be easy for me because after each and every chapter there are some questions that I should ask or I should fill in, so that I understand everything that I was reading about.” Sarie saw the self-assessment activities as a small examination where she could test her understanding of the work: “... *ek sê vir my, dis my klein eksamentjie, ek het die eerste enetjie probeer, toe kon ek nie.*” She told me that she had not studied for 25 years and found it difficult to concentrate. These activities helped her to get into the studying mode. Bergh, Van Wyk, Lemmer, Van der Linde and Van Niekerk (1996:171) draw parallels with the students’ responses saying that questions at the end of each unit are necessary because most students will take advantage of this opportunity to assess their understanding of the course material.

The students’ comments on the layout of the text were mostly positive and they felt the text was understandable and the modules had a logical sequence. Liza’s comment was: “*Ek ondervind dit baie oulik, dis baie oulik uiteen gesit. Dit is verstaanbaar, alhoewel ook omdat Engels is, is daar nou navrae werk wat ek moet doen om te kyk wat beteken die woordjies hier en daar, maar dis vir my baie goed uiteen gesit.*”

One of the assumptions I made before I commenced with the interviews was that most students would find the fact that the modules were written in English a problem, as English is their second language. It was found that only the Afrikaans-speaking students complained, most probably because their schooling had been done in Afrikaans, while all the other students had had to study in English during their school years. Sarie felt: “*ondervind ek dat ek sukkel nogal ’n bietjie om dit te verstaan. Ek sou wou gehad het, dit moet vir my in Afrikaans wees want hulle gebruik hoë Engels.*” Lina said: “*Dit was vir my baie oulik en als, en wat nog vir my frustrerend was, was die Engels, dit is ’n bietjie rof ...*” Mary expressed her view on the language issue as follows: “*No, it is not my first language, it is wrapped up in a single way, it is not so complex.*” The authors of the module included word boxes where new concepts and unknown words are explained. Maggie felt that the word boxes helped her with the terminology of the new Curriculum 2005 and the language used was easy to follow. Maggie: “*The language is easy but I feel that I have come through some certain words that will give me experience of the new curriculum that we are dealing with and then this new curriculum has got some new words also ..., so this book helped me to go*

through this terminology because the word box shows or tells you more about that technology.”

Mary gave the following suggestions on improving the course material: *“I think, sometimes there could be structured, something like a booklet which can just be for making of equipment so that it can be divided in some way like the way the children ... It is easy for construction for books so that you can be able to follow it and knowing that whenever I am going to make the equipment, I am just going to take this booklet and not using this big one for making equipment. I just want to add to that, in the quiet area I think that quiet area can be divided into two areas, it should be the book area and the educational toy area. Each area should have enough place for the children to work on.”* While listening to their suggestions I realised that they are a rich source of experience that could be utilised to improve the course material. This notion is verified by Holmberg (1995:171) and Shor (1992:85) when they refer to learners as co-constructors of knowledge.

8.2.4 Learner-tutor interaction

The interaction between the educators and learners in this reception year course was via tutorial letters, the telephone, visits, one practical session at the end of the course and the assignments that they had to submit. When participants were asked how they experienced the tutorial letters, most of them responded that they were easy to read and helped them to know exactly what, when and how to learn. Zola’s reaction was: *“They were informative and simple to understand – a lot of information and lots of contact numbers so you weren’t left out, if there was anything that I needed, there were people that I could contact.”* Suzy said: *“Goed uiteen gesit, dit gee my meer inligting – ek is baie tevrede met dit, ek kan nie sê daar is enige iets snaaks in die studie briewe nie. Dit hou my op hoogte van enige veranderinge in die kursus, soos met die praktiese sessie.”* An interesting comment from Ella was: *“Dit het my laat welkom voel.”* In this course the first tutorial letter was the educators’ first contact with the students and the personal tone of the letter had made Ella feel welcome.

It was interesting to note that as far as telephonic contact is concerned, two students have not yet felt the need to contact an educator. Both felt that they had wanted to try to do the work without help, although one of them had realised that she would need

assistance in future after she had received her assignment back and had not performed too well. Ella said: *“Ek het nie ’n dosent gekontak nie, so ek het gevoel ek wil dit op my eie doen en kyk wat is die eindresultate. Dan sal ek gaan vir hulp.”* This links up with the view discussed by Gravett (1997:9) that adult learners generally need to be independent and direct their own learning. One of the other assumptions I made at the outset of the research that some learners would have problems getting hold of the educators over the phone, was verified by students’ responses. Zola complained: *“... and whenever I did contact someone, maybe it was tea break because I didn’t get anyone then ...”* However, those students who did manage to get hold of an educator over the phone felt that their questions had been answered and they were motivated to continue. Anna said: *“Ek het met een lektrise gepraat, sy het my verskriklik aangemoedig en ek het positief gevoel om aan te gaan.”*

Generally speaking the students were satisfied that the practical session had been moved to next year. Most of them, however, felt that they would prefer regular contact sessions where they could meet their educators and discuss the work. This confirms my presuppositions at the outset of the research that the students would like contact sessions. Sarie felt: *“Ek sou persoonlik daarvan gehou het as ek net twee of drie keer ’n lesing of iets kon bywoon het waar jy ’n bietjie luister as daar met jou gepraat word.”* Maggie echoed this need: *“I think there should sometimes be contact lectures so that you can be together.”* Ella mentions the following: *“Meer kontak ... en by die leer lees jy dan en dan vergeet jy dit, maar prakties doen jy en jy onthou dit.”*

Furthermore, some students felt that contact sessions would bring them into contact with fellow students and they could then possibly form study groups. This finds agreement in the view expressed by Moore and Kearsley (1996:128-134) that learners like to have contact with other students to discuss the work. This is also in line with Vella’s (1994:18,20) view that, in a team, peers enhance learning and provide a quality of safety that is effective and helpful. Mary mentioned the following: *“The contact sessions, I think will be good because we do have chance to meet students and have chance for discussion, working in groups, is so good and ... with it, you are going to share ideas.”*

Most students felt anxious when they did their first assignment. Sarie’s comment was: *“Ek was baie op my senuwees toe ek dit begin doen het ...”* Nevertheless, after they

had received a timely response to their assignments, they felt more positive and confident about continuing. They felt that the memorandum and comments on their assignments helped them to know how to attempt the next assignment. Sarie felt that: *“Met die ‘assignment’ is ek nou heel opgewonde en definitief uit my antwoorde wat verkeerd is leer ek regtig by die memo wat ek moet raadpleeg ...”* Mary stated: *“I was so excited receiving my assignment, seeing that I have done my best and it was good for me.”* Zola felt very confident: *“I feel I am going to finish this course.”* These findings are substantiated by the views of researchers such as Greyling (1992:59,60) and Steyn (1999:34,35) that students need a speedy and constructive response to the assignment because it is an indicator as to whether they are on the right track and it could motivate them to continue. As they do not have the regular contact with their educators that full-time students at contact universities have, the feedback on assignments is a very important medium of communication between the learner and the educator.

Students had to submit an assignment and a portfolio. Most students enjoyed the portfolio more than the assignment as it relates to their working environment and is more practically oriented. Sarie’s view on the portfolio was: *“Die portfolio. Ek het meer vertrouwe gehad om hom te doen en hy was vir my meer verstaanbaar as die assignment, omdat ek dit prakties toepas in die oggend by die skool.”* This highlights the fact that adult distance learners want to link what they learn to their life-worlds and educators should take cognisance thereof when planning assignments or portfolios.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the findings of the research, the following recommendations could possibly be used for staff development programmes by distance education providers engaged in higher education.

- Most students who were interviewed experienced fear and anxiety at the outset of the course. The reason for this is that they do not understand what distance education entails. This fear and anxiety could be lessened if they understood the difference between the traditional contact teaching environment and distance learning, and what is required of them to be successful. As a result, I

propose that learners engaged in distance learning for the first time should have an orientation session on what distance learning requires of them. The research findings of Cyr (1997:44,45), as well as Moore and Kearsley (1996:166), agree with this.

- All the students who were interviewed felt that they would like some contact sessions in which they could discuss the work with lecturers and fellow students. Therefore I recommend that distance learners communicate with their educators through more frequent contact sessions in order to discuss the problems they might encounter, and through properly structured mechanical devices such as telephone conversations, tutorial letters and assignments.
- From the students' responses when they were interviewed, it is clear that their frustration with administrative matters were not realised by the staff involved. Therefore, I would like to advocate that both administrative and academic staff should participate in regular staff development sessions where the nature of distance education and the characteristics, needs and experiences of distance learners are discussed. Written excerpts from and video recordings of interviews could possibly be used for these sessions. This notion is supported by Leamson (1999:175) and Steyn (1994:7) when they assert that all staff involved in distance learning should have regular orientation sessions on what distance education is like from a student's perspective, and in-service training should be ongoing.
- Owing to the fact that the students found the interactive text very valuable in the learning process, I recommend that distance learning material be written in a conversational style, with in-text activities and where unknown concepts and new words are explained regularly. This is backed up by Scheumer in Holmberg (1995:3); Vella (1994:11) and Candy (1991:251).
- As the students felt the need to apply what they learn immediately in their life-worlds, I recommend that the course material should also contain relevant content that students can apply immediately in their life-worlds. This notion is also emphasised by Moore and Kearsley (1996:153) and Perraton (1993:401).

- The students found the video recording valuable as it brought them closer to a real life situation and helped them to understand some of the work better. In the light of their responses I am of the opinion that video recordings could be used effectively to “bring the classroom” to the learner, to clarify the written text and to cater for the learners’ diverse learning styles.
- Most students enjoyed the portfolios more than the assignments as they relate to their life-worlds and are more practically oriented. In the light of these findings, I recommend that portfolios be used more often in distance education.
- Students appreciated and were motivated by the detailed memorandums and constructive feedback they received on their assignments and portfolios. Therefore, I recommend that educators present their students with detailed memorandums and constructive feedback on the assignments and portfolios they submitted.

I concur with the view of the Minister of Education (1997:18) that distance education has an important role to play in South Africa in meeting the challenge of greater access and enhanced quality in a context of resource constraints and a diverse student body. I hope that the findings and recommendations of this research will contribute to this vision.

10. CONCLUSION

The research that was reported on in this essay focused on gaining an understanding of the experiences of adult learners engaged in distance learning at the South African College for Teacher Education while studying an Early Childhood Development programme. For this purpose I used the qualitative method of inquiry and collected data via interviews and documents. As I quoted from Vella (1994:185) in the introduction of this essay, I invited people to tell their stories, to share their hopes and fears and to simply express their experience of this educational event. Before conducting the interviews I had certain assumptions and presuppositions. Some of these assumptions and presuppositions were confirmed while others were not found relevant to this research. Furthermore, I conducted a review of the relevant literature

in order to place the research aim within a theoretical framework. Thereafter, I discussed the research strategy that has been followed and the data analysis, followed by the discussion of the findings.

In my research, I found that most students experienced excitement and fear at the outset of the course, mostly as a result of their uncertainty. I also found that their enjoyment was enhanced by the use of mechanical media, such as video recordings, and the relevancy of the course material.

Students' responses in the interviews contained valuable information on their perceptions of the course and the ways in which they believed the course could be improved.

The final section of the research contains certain recommendations that could possibly be used by distance education providers for staff development purposes, leading to improved student support at distance higher education institutions.

In conclusion, I would like to say what an enriching experience this research project has been for me as it gave me the opportunity to understand the distance learning environment from the learners' perspective. I have also realised that there are many aspects of distance learning that have not as yet been researched. As I found qualitative research methods very valuable in explaining people's views of the world, I would like to undertake more qualitative research studies if the opportunity presents itself.

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12. APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

P.O. Box 3650

Pretoria

0001

5 May 2000

Professor SD Wallace
South African College for Teacher Education
Private Bag x460
Pretoria
0001

Dear Prof Wallace

Re: Permission to conduct interviews with students registered for the Reception Year course at SACTE in partial fulfilment of an MA in Education

I am currently enrolled for an MA in Adult Education at the Rand Afrikaans University. In partial fulfilment of the degree, I need to conduct research and write a research essay on the findings. The focus of enquiry is *to gain an understanding of the experiences of adult learners engaged in distance learning at the South African College for Teacher Education in an Early Childhood Development programme.*

I will be required to conduct a qualitative research and interview a few students who are enrolled for the Reception Year course at SACTE. I will have the students' well-being and interests at heart and believe that this research could contribute to the success and enjoyment of learning at SACTE. The information that emerges from these interviews could be used to improve the Reception Year course, as well as for staff development sessions on the nature of distance learning and course design.

I would appreciate a response from you as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely

Erika Meyer

APPENDIX B

South African College for Teacher
Education

Memo

To: Mrs C Ward

From: Erika Meyer

Date: 5 May 2000

Re: Request for a printout of information of students that registered for the Reception Year course at SACTE.

Dear Christine

I am presently conducting research on the experiences of distance learners engaged in the reception year course at SACTE. As I need to select students using maximum variation sampling, I will require information on all the students that registered for the course.



The information I need is the following:

- A list of their full names and surnames
- Postal address
- Province
- Age
- Home language
- Qualifications
- Telephone numbers: home and work

I would be grateful if I could collect it by the end of this week.

Thank you in anticipation

Erika Meyer

Ext: 8054

Senior Head of Department

APPENDIX C

South African College for Teacher Education

Department of Early Childhood Education

Private Bag x460

Pretoria

0001

7 July 2000

Dear Ms / Mrs _____

I am currently busy with my MA in Adult Education at the Rand Afrikaans University and I am investigating the experiences of adult learners in distance education. I would very much like you to participate in my research. This participation would take the form of an interview, which would be conducted during a time organised with you. As Senior Head of the Early Childhood Education Department at SACTE, I have the students' interests and well being at heart and believe that this research will contribute to the success and enjoyment of learning at distance education institutions.

During the interview, I will ask you questions about your learning experiences while studying at the South African College for Teacher Education. The data collected will be treated as confidential and the identity of all participants will be protected, although it is important to mention that the results of the report will be submitted to the Rand Afrikaans University and the South African College for Teacher Education.

I would appreciate it if you could sign the consent form and return it to me in the stamped addressed envelope enclosed with this letter.

Thank you in anticipation

Erika Meyer

SHOD

APPENDIX D

South African College for Teacher Education

Department of Early Childhood Education

Private Bag x460

Pretoria

0001

7 July 2000

I _____

Hereby agree to participate in your research project on the experiences of adult learners engaged in distance education.

I give my consent that the information collected is submitted to the Rand Afrikaans University and to the South African College for Teacher Education, and that my identity will be protected.

Signature _____

Date _____

APPENDIX E**Background information**

Participant's name and surname _____

Current occupation _____

Do you have any relevant experience related to your study? _____

If stated yes, for how long? _____



APPENDIX F

Code: ZO: participant

INT: researcher

T: transcript

INT Thank you very much, I appreciate it that you are willing to have an interview with me on the experience of distance learners. The first question is what is your current occupation?

ZO I am a consultant at Horizon Teaching.

INT Can you describe to me very shortly why you have enrolled for this reception year course?

ZO With my work with Horizon; I visit a lot of play schools and a lot of day care centres and then I visited pre-schools and I thought, oh is my child going to be coming to one of these because I didn't like some of them that I went to, there was absolutely no stimulation. The kids weren't stimulated at all. There was one that I went to that the kids just sat there and the teacher read the newspaper to herself and I thought no, I have to do something to make a difference.

INT So do you think you would like to go into that field?

ZO Eventually I'd like to teach at an institution and maybe later do it on my own.

INT Describe your experiences when you received your tutorial letters? What are your experiences of them? All these letters that you received?

ZO They were very informative and simple to understand – a lot of information and lots of contact numbers so you weren't left out, if there was anything that I needed there were people that I could contact.

- INT When you received your study manuals for the first time and you opened it?
- ZO I was lost. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know where to get the information from, quite honestly, and as I read through it, a lot of it was familiar to me because of my experience with Horizon and then I sat back for a week and I said no, it cannot be so strange, and then I went back and read it and then I said there is something in here that I can do.
- INT So in the beginning you were actually (interrupted)
- ZO Very – I don't know, maybe to people that are not familiar with Horizon they would be totally lost, there is no indication that the information is in the manual, it just says you have to complete an assignment along with very very – and I said oh God, will I go through with this, but as I read through it I said it is all coming to me now.
- INT It's not so bad. So in the beginning your experiences were a little bit (interrupted)
- ZO It was because I think for anyone else that does not know what a feely bag is – I know what a feely bag is because of Horizon and we work with all that stuff and I think to any other person that doesn't know, it is very strange.
- INT How did you experience the written text, if you look at the outlay, the visual written text?
- ZO It had lots of information that we could use and lots of relevant information. It explained to you with the word boxes – it made it so much simpler, we could understand, I could understand everything that I read and if I felt that I didn't know something, I would go back to the word boxes.
- INT The next question I wanted to ask you - what is your experience of the language because of it being in English. What is your experience of the language?

ZO It was easy to understand.

INT You spoke about the word boxes. You also get the “stop and think” every now and then, that’s the activity that you can do, basically learning tasks. How did you experience these learning tasks? How did you feel when you did them?

ZO The “stop and think” really helped you to stop and think because now you are reading, there is a lot – if you look at one and two together in a picture it makes for a lot of reading but when you are reading for such a long time and then you say oh no, this is too much reading, then you come to the stop and think and an activity and then you can apply that – it is like a breakaway from the reading, so it does help you to focus maybe on the one specific topic.

INT At the end of each unit there is also that self-assessment task right at the end where you can test yourself. What is your experience of that?

ZO I feel that was good and necessary, if we do each paragraph for each chapter then you know how far or how much you understood of the chapter so I think that self-assessment was a good way of knowing; should I move onto the next chapter or do I need to go back and re-read and re-understand what I have read.

INT When you watched the video what did you experience?

ZO The sound was very poor. It was a good experience, it was a real move away from all the reading that I have been doing. It helped me to just relax and just look and watch the video and apply what I have read and it was a good change from the notes.

INT So if you didn’t have it, what would (interrupted)

ZO You would have to visualise everything, so it made it very much simpler to really see them apply what we have read, apply that in a class situation.

- INT Describe very briefly, when you wrote your first assignment, what was your experiences then, you did touch on it just now.
- ZO Very nervous. I actually sat down to write an exam after a very long time, of going back to the books.
- INT Is it long ago?
- ZO Very long, it was over 10 or 15 years.
- INT And how did you feel?
- ZO I thought I would never do it, because now you have to programme your mind to say I have to do this, now sit down and concentrate and I cannot do it at any time that I wish, my switch off time is 8pm and that is when I have to go back and do this when everybody passes out and is seen to. But it was a good experience and when I found that I could answer the questions, you know when you did your best if you answered the questions to the best of your ability. I felt good and I felt that this question needs a little bit more work. I would leave it and come back to it the next day because you need to rest your mind I think.
- INT So you paced yourself. And when you read the results and what they wrote there for you, how do you feel?
- ZO I feel I am going to finish this course.
- INT So what has your feeling been basically.
- ZO No, I have to tackle it, I am excited about the portfolio that I sent because there was lots and loads of information there.
- INT If you could compare the two, which one – how would you feel about the two of them, the portfolio and the assignment?

- ZO I am very excited about the portfolio and I am hoping – I know I am going to do well in that because I put a lot of work into that.
- INT So are you saying you enjoyed that one a bit more?
- ZO I did, because there was so much of the activities, there was so much of the creative activities that you have to plan for the class, I felt like I was already teaching.
- INT What are your experiences of the return back time of the assignment, when you sent it in and you received it now. Do you feel it is too long or is it fine or do you have anything on your experience of the return back time?
- ZO The return back, although I would have – when you send something in and you are waiting in anticipation for your results, when I got busy with the portfolio I said it's okay, when it comes, but the time was fine. It took about a month when it came back. So it was fine.
- INT And then can you tell me how you felt when you contacted any staff members, did you contact any?
- ZO Yes I did, and I had a little problem just understanding one or two things in the portfolio and then I had been in contact with a lot of them, with Anne and the other lady and whenever I did contact someone, there was always someone there, it was just the one time, I'm not sure, maybe it was a tea break because I didn't get anyone then. But whenever I did, they were very helpful and there was always someone there.
- INT So how did you feel?
- ZO I felt oh well, they'd just sent me my modules and forgot about me.
- INT Yes, you are a person. Describe your experiences of administrative staff. With your registration, the video, all that type of thing.

ZO I phoned the lady about a ticket and she was very, very helpful. She punched me up on the computer and then she said Zola your exam centre is listed for Pretoria so I said fine, send my plane ticket and she changed it to one that is convenient for me and did a change of address and all at the same time and she was very helpful on the whole.

INT Suppose I was a new person who entered this programme and I asked you, Zola, what should I do to succeed. What advise can you give me?

ZO I would recruit you as a consultant. If it was something that you really loved, to be with children because I think that is the operative word, if you cannot stand kids, I don't think you can be in a classroom. You can't. You have got to have this – you have got to want to be with them and I tell you if you love kids and if you know what you want, you must just go for it and give it all you have.

INT And even though you are a distance learner?

ZO Distance learner – with all the support that we received, the letters from term to term and whenever we contact anyone there is always someone on the other side all the time, so I'd say you would have no problem.

INT So in theory or practical or contact sessions, anything like that?

ZO We didn't have any at the moment but contact sessions we will be having and I'm sure because you flew all the way here, so I think it is going to go well.

INT And on that score – let's jump to that one, your contact session has switched to February, how do you feel about that?

ZO It is not so much of a problem for me because it is giving me a little bit more time to get myself ready I think, because as I said it is after such a long time that I have been back at the books and I think it is fine for me.

- INT The last thing. How would you – if you could give us any advice, how would you change this course or what could you add or what would you take away to make it an ideal programme?
- ZO There is a lot of reading material. I think add a little bit more of the video, more of those because it is a little break away from so much of reading. I think it just – your mind just switches off and then if you put on that video I think you are actually looking at it in a real situation, a real class situation and then you come back to your notes and it seems so much easier.
- INT Anything else that you can perhaps add? Think of your own experiences?
- ZO (Silence)
- INT Do you think the books have enough information or too much information?
- ZO There is a lot of information – at times I think a section covers too much of information. Like for example the question So much of diagrams for the ears? It was quite a bit – anything with diagrams and things. I can't think of anything offhand that I would like more of but as I said the videos helped me to get away from the notes and then practice the practical and visual situations.
- INT Anything else in general that you would like to say?
- ZO That I'm pleased to meet you.
- INT Thank you very much.
- ZO And it makes me feel, I was a bit down after I sent my assignment and then I spoke to you and the portfolio was quite lengthy as well, there is a lot to do in portfolios and it takes quite a bit of work and then after I spoke to you I said I can do this, I can do this, I just needed a little bit of motivation. So you actually motivated me to go back and say well I can finish this.

INT Thank your family also who helped you. I really appreciate the interview.

General chat.

End of interview.



