

## **EFFECTIVE LEARNING INTERACTION AS A PREREQUISITE TO SUCCESSFUL OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL):**

### **A Case study of Learners in the Northern State of Kedah and Perlis, Malaysia**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

The provision of ODL is now largely available in most part of the world, and is just a matter of choice for working adults to pursue. With the competing priorities of work, home, and school, adult learners everywhere desire a high degree of flexibility and accessibility. The structure of ODL provides learners with the greatest flexibility. It provides control over time, place and pace of education; however, learning at a distance is not without problems. Loss of student motivation due to lack of face-to-face (f2f) contact with tutors, peers and content; high startup costs, and lack of support are all barriers to the success of ODL. One important element of success factor for students attending ODL program is the level of interactivity within the student-tutor-content dyads.

This paper looks at the issue of interactivity as reported in this research on students' perspectives and experiences of ODL programs in the northern part of Malaysia. The study supported the widely held belief that a high level of interaction is desirable in ODL environment (Dzakiria, 2008, Dzakiria & Idrus, 2003; Rumble, 2000; Walker, 2002)) and positively affects the learning experiences.

Recent technological advancements, allowing an increasing level of interaction between the interactivity dyads have implicated how teaching and learning should be in an ODL environment. This study believes to improve ODL experience, decrease dropout rates and maintain success stories for ODL, tutors and all-important stakeholders in ODL must improve the provision of interaction and interactivity. It is evident from the literature that there is a still research gap on interaction issues in ODL which must be pursued and address to improve the learners' educational experience-for they are the primary clientele of ODL.

**Keywords:** Interaction; Learning Interactivity; interactivity dyads; Open Distance Learning.

#### **INTRODUCTION**

The main task of any ODL provider in the world today, is to design and offer an educational experience that encourages learning. ODL institutions and providers need to consider many factors to overcome different barriers and factors to achieve effective and efficient implementation of ODL programs. One factor that affects learners' success in ODL is the amount of learning interactions and interactivity made available for the learners.

Although Interaction is a well-documented construct within distance education literature with various prescriptions of how to incorporate interaction into the design of instruction, there is no one solution or best-fit interaction system to match all ODL programs around the world.

Teaching in an ODL programs today requires tutors to rethink and re-engineer how they deliver their courses (Dzakiria, Don & Abdul Rahman, 2012, Walker, 2002; Simpson, 2002). Interaction is one of the most challenging educational aspects to build into an ODL system, but it is also one of the most important. The level of interactivity from student-student, student-content and from student-instructor has a major impact on the quality of ODL programs (Muirhead, 2001; Dzakiria, 2005). Research studies on interactivity show that students have a real need to make connections within the interactivity dyads (Dzakiria,2008, 2006)

Learning support and sufficient amount of learning interactions are particularly important in ODL because many learners perhaps for the first time, are now "faced with a new learning environment and the expectation that they will have independent learning skills and the capacity to engage in activities that require self-direction and self- management of learning" (McLoughlin & Marshall,2000:1). It can be argued that these learners should already have these attributes. However, this generalization does not apply to all, and may not be generalized to all learners in an ODL environment. Every learner, every institution, every curriculum is unique and each exhibit different strengths and weaknesses. Malaysian learners who have journeyed through 12 years of primary and secondary education may not have an appropriate educational concept of learning at ODL (Beard & harper, 2002; Dzakiria 2008, 2006; ). It could be very teacher-centered, and their learning is characterized by dependency on teachers as knowledge providers. Their transition into becoming learners in an ODL program is not an easy task (Saw et.al., 1999). Their diversity in age, educational background, and working experience only magnifies the fact that each learner could be similar or vastly different from other learners. A learner who has left the educational setting for many years may feel incompetent and lacking in the learning skills needed to compete with other learners.

However, with the development of educational technology, learners are required to engage in 'new' ways of learning. To some students this is accepted and does not impede learning. But to others, open distance learning is 'not just a plea for knowledge', but a plea for continuous 'presence' of the teacher for learning to take place. This was the scene in early 2004 (Dzakiria, 2008, 2005, Dzakiria & Hassan 2005), and interestingly, it is still prevalent today. Within the Malaysian context of ODL, the notion that 'the teacher is always there, but isn't' in distance learning is continuous reality as depicted by the respondents in this study.

Findings shared in this paper for example suggest that the infrequent face-to-face (f2f) meetings between tutors and learners, and learners' dependency on their tutors have caused frustrations and sometimes impede the learning process. Some learners are not able to cope with ODL expectations and find that the new ways of learning and the sets of expectations that go with it just too much. In such circumstances, students expect tutors to play an important role in helping come to terms with the new ways of learning. This study also suggests that it is important that tutors also make some changes in their tutoring skills. They need to understand what is involved in ODL and must themselves account for reassessment of their teaching (Dzakiria, 2006). Therefore, there is a need for a major project; the reassessment and reengineering of the educational process by both learners and tutors and, indeed, by the university as a whole. It is not simply to introduce new technologies of communication but to're-understand' the process of open distance learning and ability to understand our clients and their needs better.

## RESEARCH SYNOPSIS

This study focused on students' perspectives and experiences on open distance learning programs at various ODL institutions and learning centers in north Malaysia. This study seeks knowledge to generate insights into how, why, when and where ODLs interact with their learning. This research is a single case study focused on ODL learning experiences of a small number of learners residing in the northern states of Malaysia, Kedah and Perlis who are attending ODL programs offered by various ODL institutions; UUM, UiTM, USM, and OUM. It is important to listen and understand the learners' voice and perspectives on their educational experiences in Malaysia. They are the primary stakeholder and beneficiary of higher education. Their contribution could have a major impact on curriculum design and education in general. The objective of this research is to elicit students' perspectives and experiences of their very own perspectives and experiences in ODL.

### Research Questions

The research questions were based on substantial literature review on ODL, and experience and theoretical knowledge of adult education and learning, technology in education, educational technologies, continuous professional development, and lifelong learning that we had been acquired over the years. The questions were then refined and grounded from the discourse and discussions with the research respondents. The research questions were subsequently revised to function as interpretative questions. Following are the research questions:

- What do the students think of their open distance learning experience?
- What are the contributing factors that support ODL learning?

### Research Objectives

The information needed for this study was individual, detailed and contextual. Finding out about the circumstances under which the learners' study, the practicalities of studying and getting into the mind frame of learners were important elements of this study. This research was based on the following three epistemological attitudes adopted from by Segall (1998):

- Metaphysical: What is the story - exploring how the learners address causality, intention, existence and truth about their open distance learning;
- Historical-search for understanding of how learning barriers and challenges began. How or what causes the learning barriers that learners face in their pursue of a worthy educational experience?

### Research Respondents

Seventeen respondents who are ODL learners were involved and selected on the basis of voluntary participation and ability to share their ODL experiences and perspectives with much openness. All the respondents were working adults' age between 34 and 48 years old. 9 males and 8 females were involved in the study. They come from various educational and economic backgrounds, are presently working in various sectors and positions: teaching, technical, and clerical.

### Research Setting

The research was a one-year research project funded by UUM RIMC initiatives. The research was conducted in the northern part of Malaysia in the state of Kedah and Perlis where most of the respondents reside and work. Interviews were conducted at several locations depending on the respondents' availability. Some of the interviews were conducted at the respondents' work place, others were at the respondents' home, kopi-tiam cafes, and other outlets.

## METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH APPROACH

An instrumental qualitative case study (Stake 1995) approach was employed so as to understand the experience of individual learners as they progressed through their Executive Diploma studies at UUM. The research used interview as the primary instrument. All the learners (research participants) involved in this study were interviewed on a one-to-one basis, and this was the basis of the data reported in this paper.

The interview guide functions as an interview protocol and helped to ensure good use of limited interview time available during the fieldwork. Most of the interviews were conducted in Bahasa Malaysia, and English language was only used when necessary and possible. The interviews were then transcribed, translated and profiled. Besides face to face interviews, the respondents also engaged and probed into more questions through e-mail, SKYPE and chat interviews which all contributed to a substantial amount of data for the research.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

While there are various issues and findings revealed by this study, this paper only discusses findings pertaining to learning interactivity as a pre-requisite to successful learning in ODL. This is pursued with an utmost dedication to ensure that learning interactivity in ODL is sufficiently addressed to improve the overall learning experience in an ODL environment. This may be true for all ODL institutions, but the relevancy of the research findings may differ, and have different implication to readers and researchers. All ODL institutions aim to be an effective provider of education. If these institutions wish to promote ODL, issues pertaining to learning interactivity and support must be addressed effectively. Apparent neglect of this area will result in higher attrition and dropout rates among learners. The students as evident in this study needed continuous human contact-the presence of a teacher figure to guide their learning as depicted by the following learner in the study:

*Totally different experience.....felt lonely the first 2 semesters, no interaction at all... I was lost not knowing what to do and how to learn effectively in my ODL experience...*

*Once I am familiar of the expectations, and the use of LMS, the forum, the discussion and interaction becomes interesting, meaningful and that help my learning in most of my course..*

*I attribute my success now on my tutors...if they support and provide the interactions you need to learn then learning will follow, ...but not all tutors are good and effective. Some of them do not provide you with the essential support to learn...*

This is supported by other learners, when they say:

*Learning in ODL is not as easy as it sounds...especially when you only see your tutors 3 or 4 times a semester. Your success depends a lot on the tutor's effectiveness in teaching, managing the course and most important of all managing to help us the learners learn and interact....*

*I think the most important of all is still your tutor and the teaching and interactions you have with her or him...we just need to re-learn to learn in an ODL environment, and tutor's role is to help us do that...*

*We are adult learners that must be treated differently....we come back to school or university with working experiences...surely that must have a*

*value....we need tutors to make our learning, and interaction more meaningful and fun to learn....*

The meaning of such frustrations is still not well understood by many ODL tutors, possibly due to the fact that a majority of them (tutors particularly at dual mode institutions) are "products" of a face to face (f2f) institution themselves (Dzakiria, 2008, 2006). As such:

- They do not have any ODL and experience as far as tutoring an ODL courses and developing ODL material is concerned;
- They may be subject specialists, but with very little or no experience in ODL;
- They have not experienced the frustration that adult learners have in ODL;
- They may not understand what is involved for the student being deprived of f2f interaction with their tutors.

The consequence is that the lecturers and educators have very little sympathy with the learners. They don't understand the degree of difficulties that learners may have in pursuing their ODL course. Tutors should be seen not just as knowledge providers but as learning support providers. In reality, the process of student learning at in an ODL environment as revealed in this study is more complex than the conventional f2f setting, the reason being, that the obstacles that these learners encounter may differ from one learner to another, with varying degrees of complexity as depicted by the following discourse:

*I have 7 children...my decision to take an ODL program is to improve my career....hopefully a better position and that comes with better pay...*

*I enroll in this program at USM because I want to be a role model to my children. One of them is studying here at UUM, and I just wanted to learn together...*

*I am marketing guy who is always away on business trip...ODL is the most flexible that I can pursue to get a degree...*

### **Adapting New Technology and Fostering New Ways of Learning**

There is widespread call within the literature to foster a greater sense of social membership, presence and learner commitment (Dzakiria, 2006, 2005). However, while human interaction is often stated as a desired instructional goal within ODL, social interaction in and of itself does not guarantee an engagement of meaningful learning (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005; Dzakiria & Hassan, 2005).

Within the ODL environment, it is the balance, or equilibrium of interactions between the learning interactivity dyads that must be pursued.

Tutor interaction is monumental, not only within tutor-learner-tutor interaction, but also in supporting the *learner-content*, and *learner-learner* interaction, and ability to promote one-one interaction, as well as tutor-group interaction as inserted by Dunlap, Sobel, and Sands (2007)-there must be "ideal of balanced interaction"; one in which learner to content, learner to learner, and learner to instructor interaction are always considered.

It should come as no surprise that the learners recognize that participating in ODL courses involves 'changes' on different levels.

Most notable were the perceptions of learning to work more independently and having to adopt more active learning modes as a result of learning at a distance:

*Generally, I know that we have to change how we learn....spoon feeding is not the culture in ODL programs and we have to learn to discover knowledge...*

*ODL is about being proactive in your own learning....*

*ODL is about you making more effort to learn....do your own research and readings, tutors are there to facilitate your learning...*

It does not take much time for the learners to notice the fundamental differences between ODL , and f2f campus based learning as suggested by the above discourse . But, what needs attention is that to transform these learners to have the educational 'change' for ODL, tutors need to provide optimal learning support system, and the learning interaction that the learners sought:

*Though ODL is not new in Malaysia....the learning system and approach is still fairly new to general Malaysians....I guess this is where we need the tutors to guide and facilitate and do that effectively....*

*We need all the interactions we can get, and we value that so much because it is largely absent compared to the conventional f2f education or class...*

*Evidently, learning in an ODL environment is different from traditional learning experiences. Malaysian learners, for example, in general have cultural orientations towards learning which make educational experience learning within the ODL difficult to grasp mostly at the initial transition. The learners are more reserved, and sometimes passive participants in classroom discussion.*

As a result, they sometimes feel at a loss when clear instructions are not given for work, assignments, and experiments. When this happens, they are tempted to blame their tutors for an apparent lack of knowledge or commitment as revealed in some of the learners' discourse. This interpretation has interesting implications for the tutors and learners.

They have to change their teaching and learning and study habits because at times the content may have been ambiguous and tutors' feedback was delayed. If this is typical of Malaysian learners, it would not be difficult to see Saw's et.al (1999) claim that making the transition to ODL might be challenging for Malaysian learner and this is still a valid reality today.

### **Revisiting Common Barriers to ODL**

More so than traditional students, distance learners are more likely to have problems about learning (Donald, J., 1997; Dzakiria, 2004, McCloughlin, C. & Marchall, L, 2000; Knapper, 1988).

As depicted in Dzakiria, (2004); Dzakiria & Rozhan, (2003), Saw, Awang, Idrus, Atan, Azli, Jaafar, Rahman, and Latiff, (1999). Students who come from conventional forms of education that practice teacher-centeredness as opposed to student-centeredness may find the transitional period of becoming an ODL student more challenging. Such problems are founded in personal and school-related experiences and other contributing factors such as financial costs of study, disruption of family life, perceived irrelevance of their studies and lack of support from employers. These pressures often result in higher dropout rates than among traditional students (Sweet, 1986, Dzakiria, 2004).

This research found that the learners are not always given immediate feedback that may come with f2f interaction in a traditional course.

'Feedback' here means more interactions than just comments on their written work, and more reassurance from tutors reiterating a point or responding to a question asked by a distance learner:

*So far, in general I have enjoyed my ODL courses....my only regrets are when some tutors do not reply your email or questions in the learning forum urgently....that slowed down my learning*

*If you get a reply 4 days or 5 days later...what good is it...it also shows how important we are to the tutors... Delayed response equals stress for us, the learners....*

In addition, learners are sometimes unsure of the tutors' meaning when interpreting the lectures and materials without having this level of reassurance. This in turn may cause the learners to experiment with many different possibilities for meaning, thereby constructing their own knowledge and making connections to situations that are more meaningful to them, but at the risk of 'being wrong'. The degree of uncertainty in this process can cause the learner to lose self-control, power to make decisions and courage. They make mistakes, and continued errors may demotivate them from learning successfully. This in turn may lead to failure and withdrawal from ODL as depicted by the following discourse:

*This is my 4 semester....and I am not doing well, not only I feel I am behind all the time, but I also think that the tutors do not help and facilitate my learning.... They expect you to learn and understand all the time...little explanation, and high expectation....come on, not all learners are smart and fast learners.....we need them to coach us accordingly...*

An area which is of interest to this article is the perceived lack of feedback or interaction with the tutor. Due to the nature of ODL there is lack of f2f contact with teachers so students may have trouble in learning and self-evaluation. Keegan (1986) believes that the separation of tutor and learner imposed by distance removes a vital "link" of communication between these two important stakeholders in ODL. The link must be restored through overt institutional efforts so that the teaching-learning transaction may be "reintegrated" (Keegan, 1986, p. 120). Keegan hypothesized that students who did not receive adequate reintegration measures such as electronic or telephone communication would be less likely to experience complete academic and social integration into institutional life.

Consequently, such students would be more likely to drop out. It is important that the students receive prompt feedback in any institutional setting, particularly in ODL where the learner is impaired by the lack of f2f contact with the teacher and other students. This is especially important for those students who do not live in big cities where connectivity, network systems, and accessibility could be additional determining factors for a satisfactory ODL educational experience especially in the northern part of Malaysia:

*I work and live in Koding...a small town which is not as well developed as a bigger city like Alor Setar, Kangar, what more cities like Kuala Lumpur, Penang and others. Connectivity is sometimes good, sometimes bad. Accessibility is not always there...so when you do not get reply from your tutors in time....it will delay your learning progress...*

They may not have access to reliable telecommunications, computers, and technology. The frustrations resulting from problems with interactivity between students and other ODL stakeholders are factors of which ODL administrators should be continuously be reminded and be aware of.

The isolation that results from the ODL process can complicate the learning process for adult learners. Support for learners should not be overlooked when planning ODL programs. Students need to help those complete courses on time and to act as a support system when stress becomes a problem. Dzakiria (2004) notes that student services should be a significant part of the budgeted costs of any ODL program. Dzakiria (2004), Dzakiria & Idris (2003 ); Murphy, Walker and Webb, (2001); Tait, (2002) also believe that success in attracting, serving, and retaining students will depend more on excellent student support services than on any technology issues. Technology costs and considerations can be a source of budgeting problems; however, student support for distance learners should take precedence.

The advancement of technology has brought to the demise of 'distance' aspect of ODL. However, the lack of interaction and interactivity promote new dimension of 'distance' in ODL. The lack of learning interactivity takes away much of the social interactions that would be present in traditional learning environments. This problem must be mitigated by institutions providing a sense of personal involvement between the student with the tutors and t institutions. Both the tutors and learners need to be inducted to the ODL delivery system. Tutors must be trained and understand what and how to teach at in an ODL environment; and the learners, on the other hand, must know the expectations and routine as learners. Tutors need to interact continuously with learners either electronically, by phone or f2f with them as depicted in this research.

This paper believes that having effective ODL tutors is important to help the learners get the most out of their ODL programs (Meacham & Evans, 1989, Dzakiria, 2004; Dzakiria & Hassan, 2005). Another problem is prevalent with new ODL learners. If distance learning institutions are serious about providing equity of educational opportunity to all, then careful consideration must be given to the special needs of students undertaking ODL program for the first time. Study materials must take into account the significant proportion of students who enroll with little or no experience of ODL as this is common in a country like Malaysia. These students are at risk of dropping out unless they develop study survival skills as rapidly as possible. Of particular importance is the design of study materials for ODL. Malaysia distance learners, for instance, needs to be inducted to what constitute learning within the ODL environment.

They must know what ODL is all about i.e. the learning and teaching process, and other relevant facets of ODL. Making it compulsory for all new students to take an introduction to ODL as practice by Universiti Sains Malaysia is commendable and should be modeled by other dual modes and ODL institutions in Malaysia as described by the following discourse:

*You know USM is my second attempt in ODL....took years ago with one institution, and I just got frustrated and got behind in learning after 3 semesters I just drop out...now I am taking another program but at USM...and I think I am enjoying it a lot better. USM and its tutors support me better.....their mandatory campus stay for one semester is the best of all...it provides you a sense of being a part of the bigger student population at USM and it also provide you with what to expect in your learning...that is the most attributing factors to my success so far here...I think I am proud with my 3.4 cumulative average here at USM*



### **Revisiting Interaction in ODL**

Interactivity has many different facets (Murphy, Walker & Webb, 2001). In instructional theory, interaction provides the means for learners to receive feedback (Dempsey & Sales, 1994, Tait, 2000). In so far as feedback determines successful learning progress, it can be argued that the more the interaction provided, the better it would be for the learner, the learning and the teaching process. In the context of traditional classroom teaching, Flanders (1970), for example, made detailed studies of student-teacher interaction and concluded that increased interaction improved student achievement and attitudes towards learning. This is supported by Dzakiria (2004), Dzakiria & Idrus, (2003).

The importance of interaction in ODL generally is acknowledged. This is evident in the literature (Bernard et.al., 2009; Billings, Connors, & Skiba, 2001; Boyle & Wambach, 2001; King & Doerfert, 2000; Meyen & Lian, 1997; Moore & Kearsley, 1996; Muirhead, 2001a, 2001b; Sherry,1996; Wagner, 1994) and the concept of interaction in ODL has been the focus of much research (Billings et al., 2001; King & Doerfert, 2000; Muirhead, 2001a, 2001b; Dzakiria, 2008; Dzakiria, 2005; Dzakiria & Hassan 2005). However, no consensual definition for interaction exists in the educational literature (Soo & Bonk, 1998, Dzakiria & Idrus, 2003; Dzakiria, 2004). The concept of interaction is a core element of the seven principles of good practice in education (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). These practices include: encouraging faculty/students' contact; developing reciprocity and cooperation; engaging in active learning; providing quick feedback; emphasizing the amount of time dedicated to a task; communicating high expectations; and respecting diversity.

Even though there are still many unanswered questions about interactivity, it is still possible to provide guidelines for improving the degree of interactivity in ODL. A variety of techniques for creating learner participation and generating discussions are recommended (e.g., Cyrs & Smith, 1990; Monson, 1978; Ostendorf, 1989) as well as methods for increasing learner involvement in learning materials (e.g. advanced organizers, self-assessment exercises). There are extensive guidelines available for interactive media (e.g., Lochte, 1993; Schwier & Misanchuk, 1993, Murphy, Walker & Webb, 2001; Simpson, 2002). Almost all such recommendations emphasize that interactivity must be planned or it is unlikely to occur (or be meaningful). The idea that interaction must be explicitly designed in ODL courses seems a difficult concept for many tutors to accept or understand. But, that is the challenge!

Finally, we need to consider that the perception of interactivity may be as important as actual interaction. Fulford & Zhang (1993) examined learner perceptions in a course delivered by instructional television. They found that the critical predictor of student satisfaction in the course was not the extent of personal interaction, but the perception of overall interaction. In other words, if students perceived that there had been a high level of student interaction in the course, they were satisfied regardless of how much interaction they had personally. This result suggests that the potential for interaction is an important design factor in open distance learning courses, even if most students do not take advantage of this potential. Responsibility for creating interactivity in ODL programs rest with the course tutors. Tutors must build interactive sequences into their classes either in terms of simple question & answer sessions or more elaborate problem-solving or game activities. Similarly, tutors anywhere in the world must provide assignments and group activities that promote interaction. While the preparation time is not appreciable, the time required to conduct interactive segments and provide feedback can be significant. We do not have any data that tells us how the two kinds of interaction affect student achievement. We do know from evaluation studies that both kinds of interaction are valued by students and contribute to their satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) with the program.

Some students report that they feel less involved in the class than other students. Other students consider the opportunity to interact with the tutors and their classmates to be one of the best features of ODL.

On the other hand, students who do not receive timely feedback from the tutors become very frustrated (Dzakiria, 2004). So we feel that interactivity when conducted properly by tutors increases the motivation of students to complete ODL courses.

## **CONCLUSION**

All ODL institutions aim to be effective functioning distance learning providers. For that matter issues pertaining to learning interaction and interactivity must be addressed effectively.

Apparent neglect of the role of interaction which clearly links the student-instructor-content and the learning environment needs attention and revision. The task is to design and offer ODL experience that encourages learning.

ODL providers need to understand that its educational products and services are to service the learner and provide an encouraging educational experience.

We must consciously and actively develop and maintain approaches which enable learners to have their voices heard, for tutors and educators, and ODL institutions themselves to be able to listen and understand the practical implications of what is being said.

The learners should never be perceived as the problem, but should be perceived and integrated as part of the solution.

Such approach and attitude will benefit all stakeholders in DE. Last but not least in designing learning interaction for ODL, this paper wishes to encourage the ODL providers to choose appropriate combinations of methods for particular open distance learning contexts. It is important to note that the recommendations that this article proposes are certainly not the 'best-fit' to learning interaction issues in ODL. Nor do they necessarily provide optimal advice pertaining to components within the issue of interaction and interactivity.

They are however made in an earnest effort to firstly sensitize tutors and other primary ODL stakeholders of the importance of their role in providing learning support in ODL and more importantly to stimulate thought, dialogue, and future research in providing interaction to ODL programs. Continued research on interaction and interactivity within the cycle of *tutor-student-content* in ODL is essential. The challenge, however, is to ensure that learning interactivity and support in ODL is sufficiently addressed in striving towards a better open distance learning experience. There are various research gaps that can be pursued to enhance understanding of ODL learning interaction and interactivity. These may include the following questions:

- Is frequency of interaction a meaningful measure of success or failure of ODL?;
- Is interaction more important for certain groups of learners than others?;
- Is interaction more critical in certain kinds of learning than others?;
- Does interaction affect ODL outcomes such as retention or transfer?;
- Does interaction increase ODL's student comprehension/understanding?;
- Does interactivity always improve learner satisfaction? AND,
- What form of interaction is the most critical in ODL?

In order to examine these issues, we need studies that isolate specific dimensions of interaction. We also need descriptive studies that provide a clear picture of interactivity as it currently exists in ODL courses.

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