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The Student Experience of Distance Education: Reviews of two qualitative theses designed to explore the day-to-day experience of learners studying online.

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There is an emerging body of published research inquiring into distance education, yet the student experience is under-represented. Berge and Mrozowski (2001) examined ten years (1990-99) of dissertations and journal articles from four distance education journals. They reported that of 1,419 publications, 890 depicted research studies. They classified the research articles into ten different content themes. 31% of the articles addressed content themes regarding learners. Of these, 17% of the papers addressed learner characteristics, 8% redefining roles of key participants, and 6% learner support. The authors did not specify whether these papers incorporated experience from the perspective of the students although the labels of the content themes would suggest otherwise.

This research review critiques two qualitative theses designed to explore the day-to-day experience of learners studying online. Both are written in the tradition of hermeneutic phenomenology, described by van Manen (1997) as "a *descriptive* methodology because it wants to be attentive to how things appear, it wants to let things speak for themselves" and as "an *interpretive* methodology because it claims that there are no such things as uninterpreted phenomena" (p.180). A commitment to learners and educators as active constructors of knowledge has implications for the research rationale, the questions asked, and the means of study. The reviewed research is motivated by a belief that improvements to distance education must be preceded by conversations with those invested in the experience, namely the students.

Dickie, S. (1999). The Lived Experience of Being a Distance Learner. Unpublished Master's thesis. Athabasca University.

Dickie completed her master's degree at a distance through Athabasca University. She inquired into her own, and three of her colleagues' experience through:

- One-on-one, face-to-face conversations followed-up with 'consultative reviews'.
- Biographies and 'protocols' (students' personally authored learning events).
- Limited review of documents deriving out of their experience such as one of the learner's journal and time-line.

Dickie's research is ground-breaking. She was the first North-American researcher to conduct a deep inquiry into what it is like to be an online learner. She applies the reflexive methodologies as described by researchers such as Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2000), recognizing language both as reflective and constitutive of meaning. She skillfully integrates her roles as researcher and informant, depicting her own experiences as one of

the participant case studies in the research. She involves the participants, not as subjects, but as co-informants, involving them in all stages of depiction, interpretation and presentation of the research.

Dickie posed five questions:

1. How is distance learning experienced?
2. What is the meaning of distance learning for learners?
3. When we are learning at a distance, what is it we are attempting to do, to accomplish, to gain, to discover?
4. If learning is an important goal of distance learning, then what do we learn?
5. What do distance learners experience in addition to what has been purposely planned as part of the curriculum?

Dickie reflects that:

- There is a symbiotic relationship between distance learning, lifelong learning, and personal development.
- Traditional performance indicators such as time to completion do not 'fit' the experience of distance learners.
- Issues such as interactivity are effected by whether technologically based instruction is designed on a user-based versus provider-based model.
- Issues of isolation and connection/relatedness are understood through a constructivist view of knowledge.

Dickie provides ten recommendations for educators such as, "distance learners must take ownership of their learning situation by being responsible for their learning as more independent and self-directed learners" (p.192). These recommendations are prescriptive and assume generalization that is not inherent to interpretive inquiry.

Dickie's conversations were not spaced to inquire into change or experience over time. She conducted all of her interviews through face-to-face methods and did not bring the participants together for any shared dialogues. In her conclusion, she poses the question of whether the inquiry into distance learning might take place online rather than face-to-face. She spoke only to the students and not the course instructors. Her review of the literature both in the areas of educational technology and hermeneutic phenomenology are limited in breadth and depth. The conversations and interpretation are presented such that the reader is obligated to read much of the same text three, and even four times, first as conversation transcripts, followed by the same transcripts interrupted with Dickie's comments. The third presentation reflects Dickie's interpretations (i.e. sequenced by themes rather than by the actual order of the interview event) and, finally, as review consultations with the participating student.

Robinson, P. (2000). Within the Matrix: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Investigation of Student Experiences in a Web-Based Computer Conferencing. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. University of Maryland.

Robinson's dissertation through the University of Maryland is unique in that her Web-based

multi-media writing makes distribution possible only through CD-ROM. Her presentation is rich in graphics, hypertext, and sound. Robinson explored the student experience in Web-based computer conferencing (WCC). She had conversations with seven members of the 1998 graduating class in "new professional studies" in school transformation. She had two face-to-face conversations with each student and one "virtual focus group" through the chat communication tool. She discussed a number of research "implications":

- When asked to describe their experiences, the course content or learning was not an emerging topic.
- WCC, as asynchronous and text-based meant that students had to use their "imagination" to experience the "Other"; others, such as Dreyfus (2001), Friesen (2002), and Postman (2003, 1994) describe this virtual connection as 'disembodied'.
- The interface is designed on the metaphor of the bulletin board; she queries the implications of using a metaphor of theatre or narrative.
- The WCC did not promote experiences of multiple intelligences.
- Students did not experience themselves as 'being in' the learning experience.
- The interface did not create a "gathering place" conducive to learning.
- Learning exists within both formal and informal discourse, and the "language of conversation".
- Students felt that they were being "watched" on-line and there was a tension between taking up school reform and the seemingly inconsistent evaluation of their own learning activities.

Robinson's presentation is intriguing and media-rich. Her depiction of what it is like to be an online learner is filled with pathos, and orients the reader to the potential and the dangers as we continue to explore and develop distance education. Robinson's conversations are grounded in ontological and epistemological perspective, as well as a well-informed philosophy of education.

Her medium conveys a message about her post-modern beliefs about the situated, contextual and complex nature of knowing. However, her interface is not intuitive. It is challenging to locate and then read the narrative.

Her interviews are restricted to the students and do not include the instructors. Her research method is inconsistent with the technology she is studying. Although she facilitates one online focus group, she conducts her one-on-one interviews face-to-face, and does not explore the possibility of interactive interviewing online.

The research considered here is essential if we are to move the field of distance education further. Considering both the design and experience of the participants is critical. Therefore, researchers must ensure that their methods parallel the permissive possibilities of the online medium, not only by being more inclusive of participants' voices but also by allowing considered and reflective responses over time.

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