The Impact of Socio-Cultural Issues for African Students in the South African Distance Education Context

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Abstract

Open Distance Learning (ODL) takes place within different environments that are influenced by the social, cultural and political fields in which a student lives. This is particularly significant in South Africa where distance learning has been identified as the main system that should provide access to higher education for most students in the country. Through ODL, disadvantaged students can have access to higher education. This study uses a socio-cultural framework to examine distance education students’ accounts of their experiences of learning. It reveals aspects of the socio-cultural contexts that tend to be marginalised by ODL institutions.

Résumé

L'apprentissage ouvert et à distance (AOD) se déroule dans divers environnements qui sont influencés par les milieux social, culturel et politique dans lesquels un étudiant vit. Ceci est particulièrement vrai en Afrique du Sud où l'apprentissage à distance a été identifié comme étant le principal dispositif pouvant offrir un accès aux études supérieures, à la plupart des étudiants du pays. Par le biais de l'AOD, les étudiants moins fortunés peuvent accéder aux études supérieures. Cette recherche emploie un cadre de référence socioculturel pour étudier les témoignages rendus par les étudiants au sujet de leurs expériences d'apprentissage. L'étude révèle certains volets des contextes socioculturels qui tendent à être marginalisés par les établissements d'AOD.

Introduction

Open Distance Learning (ODL) is identified by the South African government as a system that should expand educational opportunities and provide access to individuals who would not have the opportunity to study full time. Various higher education documents reveal a policy commitment to
the adoption of ODL as the main mode of widening participation and addressing wider educational problems in general (Department of Education (DoE), 1996; Council of Higher Education (CHE), 2004). The National Commission on Higher Education Report (1996) cites distance education as a critical player in redressing past inequalities and removing barriers to access and success. It proposes that ODL institutions increase the number of registered students and accommodate them with varied levels of competencies at reduced costs. Through ODL, disadvantaged and poorer students, who mainly live in townships and remote rural areas, are provided an opportunity to access higher education without relocating from their families and communities (CHE, 2004).

Since 1994, distance education in South Africa has been responsible for a large share of the increased participation in higher education; from just over 104,000 head-count enrolments in 1990 to over 300,000 in 2008 (DoE, 2010). The participation by African students increased from 49% in 1995 to 63% in 2007 (CHE, 2009). Distance education institutions constitute more than 38% of all higher education enrolments in the country and more than 85% of students studying through distance are enrolled at the University of South Africa (UNISA), one of the oldest and largest distance education providers in Africa (DoE, 2010). Although statistics show that distance education has been successful in increasing participation in higher education, graduation rates declined from 11% in 2004 to 9.5% in 2007 (CHE, 2009). The majority of students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, have not been successful in completing their studies. Although it is commonly known that some students in distance education have problems completing their studies, the student throughput at UNISA does not, however, compare well with other ODL institutions, according to the 2009 Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) Audit report. This is a source of great concern for the university because, if this trend continues, UNISA will be not be able to realize its social justice mandate that requires institutions of higher learning to produce a significant number of graduates to alleviate the critical skills shortage in the country and contribute to social development.

The distinguishing characteristic of distance education from other conventional education systems is that it serves as —a means of extending access to education to those who might otherwise be excluded from the educational experience|| (Garrison & Shale, 1987: 10-11). What is critical in distance education, according to Moore (1993), is to ensure that educational programs are responsive to the students' individual needs. He argues that distance education is not only a geographic separation between teachers and learners but also constitutes a pedagogic separation. In this separation there is a —psychological and communications space to be crossed, a space of potential misunderstandings|| between instructors and students who are physically separated (Moore, 1993: 22) and, that more often than not, —students are expected to step out of their own culture and temporarily enter into the culture of distance education providers who tend to view learning as an individual phenomenon. As Holmberg (1985) asserts, distance study is based on —personal work by an individual student independent from the direct guidance of the lecturer|| (p. 18).

The problem arises when the interaction between tutor and learner is not as frequent as expected, that is, on a similar level as in conventional face-to-face contexts—then problems tend to arise. In distance or correspondence education, the educational process is usually reduced from a dialogue to a monologue, where lecturers tend to only send out study material to the students, the assumption being that students do not necessarily require mediation or support as they go through
their study material. If distance education educators could acknowledge and follow the
techniques of guided didactic conversation, they might motivate students to study and they
might be able to improve students' success rates more than if the course has an
impersonal textbook character (Holmberg, 1985), despite Thorpe's (2001: 4) argument
that —course materials prepared in advance of study, however learner-centred and
interactive they may be, cannot respond to an unknown learner‖. It is, therefore, important
that mediated conversation between the students and the teacher should happen through
integrated and structured dialogue, both in the study material and all other interventions
aimed at the formative development of students in distance education.

Vygotsky (1930/1978) argues that learning is a social and a cultural act rather than an
individual phenomenon. An individualistic view of learning —fails to take into account how
issues of positionality of instructors and students, classroom culture, and institutional
culture influence learners' experiences in the higher education environment” (Tisdall,
2000). It is, therefore, important to recognise the impact of culture and society on learning
development. Socio-cultural practices, such as beliefs, values, customs, norms and
attitudes tend to affect individual students' behaviour and ultimate success. It is, therefore,
important that ODL institutions have an understanding of, as well as embrace, their
students' socio-cultural contexts, in order to deliver educational programmes that are
responsive to their students' needs. This understanding of ODL students' social and
cultural contexts is of particular relevance in South Africa, where access issues are critical
for the economic development of the country.

This paper examines African distance education students' experiences of learning from a
socio-cultural perspective, using UNISA as a case study. UNISA represents the ideal
context for investigating rural and township students' learning experiences in an ODL
context, because it is South Africa's only dedicated comprehensive distance education
institution that combines academic and vocationally-oriented curricula. It is often assumed
that students have easy access to basic facilities that are essential in enhancing their
academic development, however, various townships and rural areas, which are mainly
African residential areas, tend to lack the necessary, taken-for-granted facilities, such as
libraries, telephones, electricity, and access to computers and reliable postal services.
These are realities of the South African context, which are likely to impact negatively on
student learning if not addressed adequately. Increased access to higher education can
only be successful if distance education providers understand the varying contexts and
socio-cultural circumstances of their students.

The Socio-cultural Context

The aim of distance education within the socio-cultural context is to ensure that students
—understand their societies and structures in order to give them ways of creating meaning
in their environments and relationships‖ (Akinsolu, 2005). The dynamic relationship
between the individual and other structures, including their culture, history, interpersonal
interactions, psychological development and languages, is central to Vygotskian theory.
He argues that each stage of an individual's development is culturally conceptualised by
activities that are carried out in an interaction with the self (Vygotsky, 1930/1978). Socio-
cultural theorists explore culture from a historical context but also view it as a dynamic
interaction between the individual and environmental contexts (Rogoff, 1995). Cole (2003)
refers to a context as a set of circumstances,
which are separate from the individual but within which the individual interacts and which influence an individual in various ways. The context is dynamic and comprises complex personal and environmental factors that are intertwined.

Contextual factors impact on students' learning and reflect their 'learning journeys' which, as various studies reveal, are necessary considerations for widening access, because they frame students' expectations and have been shown to have a powerful influence on whether or not learning is facilitated (Lephalala, 2004; Makoe, 2006; Tresman, 2001). Some of the key contextual factors that have been identified as essential to facilitating student access include educational background, geographical situation, language, and ethnic and cultural characteristics (Tait, 2000: 21). Various studies elsewhere, including Usun (2006) on Turkish students, Alison and Katijan (2000) on Aboriginal students and Purdie & Hattie (2002) on Japanese students, as well as Makoe (2006), indicate that cultural factors such as obedience, honour, and respect for authority, as well as bonds of friendship and mutual assistance among classmates tend to take precedence over individualistic attributes such as self-actualization and self-reliance. As a result, these cultural characteristics tend to make independent textbook learning less suitable for these students.

These studies are of particular importance in distance education where students are likely to feel isolated from their lecturers and other fellow students. In his transactional theory, Moore (1993) emphasises the need for dialogue and quality engagement with students in distance education. He argues for a more interactive relationship with students where dialogue, structure (teaching strategies and evaluation methods), and learner autonomy are prioritised. However, it is important that dialogue in distance education does not only rest with course design and delivery or even with the media technology selection, but it should recognise that students are key agents in their learning (Evans & Nation, 1989). Therefore students should be encouraged to participate in an active and challenging way in the learning process. Thus, an understanding of how students learn should incorporate their social and cultural practices. Such understanding is of relevance in ODL contexts, where students' experiences of learning and their daily interactions are of particular importance.

Data Collection

To understand how students learn in their socio-cultural environment, data was collected through interviews with 80 African undergraduate students from both urban and rural areas. Non-probability sampling was useful in collecting data because it incorporated both convenient and purposive sampling (Denscombe, 1998). It was convenient in that participants were readily available and accessible. The sampling was also purposive as selection was based on the fact that both groups of participants in this study – rural and township students – are central to the understanding of how the socio-cultural environments influences students' experiences of learning, and offered greater possibilities —to better understand the relationships that existed|| (Denscombe, 1998, p. 169).

Of the 80 participants, 20 came from remote rural areas in South Africa and 60 from township areas around the main campus of UNISA. Both rural and township areas are mainly African residential areas that tend to be under-resourced. As a result, participants are representative of disadvantaged students, that is, they are the 'marginalised' and
non-traditional' students who, in line with current legislation on widening student participation, higher education institutions are expected to accommodate. These students are first-generation university attendees in their immediate families or communities and they come from families where parents are either semi-literate or illiterate. Students residing in townships were invited to take part in focus group interviews at UNISA. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Students comprised 60 first-year undergraduate students with ages ranging between 19 and 30. The first year is of significance since it is at this point that students' expectations are either realised or frustrated. Although they were registered at a distance education institution, students regarded themselves as full-time students, mainly because they were unemployed. Semi-structured face-to-face individual interviews were conducted with the 20 students from rural areas. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The average age of students who resided in rural areas was 35 and the majority of the female students in the study were employed full time as school teachers. There are several factors that make studying particularly difficult for students living in rural areas, including high levels of poverty, illiteracy and unemployment. As a result, education prospects are poor and gaining an education is a goal only a few can achieve.

Data Analysis

In keeping with Dey's (1993) argument, that—analysis is not sequential in practice but iterative and occurs in tandem with data collection‖ (p. 265), data analysis was an ongoing process that occurred throughout, alternating between data collection and reflection. The analysis of data is in line with the realist approach where the data from interviews were treated as factual statements (Silverman, 2000) and similar patterns and themes were noted and coded (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The analysis process involved grouping and categorising data that had similar units of meaning, continuously refining and generating new categories at each phase (Silverman, 2000; Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this analysis, the participants expressed 68 meaning units pertaining to their experiences of learning in the ODL environment. The themes and relationships between the meaning units were categorised into four themes that emerged: environmental; social; cultural, and economic. Every meaning unit as expressed by participants could fit into one of these four themes.

The use of the social interaction framework in the analysis allowed for the exploration of social formations and social locations; intra- and interpersonal struggles; and relationships between students and the institution, their peers and families and communities. The purpose of this analysis was to bring together the meaning of the experiences of learning through distance education. When people talk about their experiences they refer to their previous perspectives, self-perceptions, relationship shifts and how they developed the meaning of their new identity (Stevens, 2003), in this instance as distance learners. What emerged in this study was that students' ideas about their experiences of learning were viewed in relation to their hopes, frustrations, intentions and histories. As the discussion below shows, the context of participants' circumstances influenced how they interacted with their learning environment.
Discussion

In the discussion, the extracts from the interviews are numerically and alphabetically coded. The numbers 1, 2, 3, ... indicate that the student was coded as first, second or third in the interviews. The letter T stands for Township, R for Rural, M for Male and F for Female.

The Environmental Aspects

Environmental aspects, that is, the physical environment in which learning takes place, comprise students’ geographic location as well as the availability of resources in that environment. The environment as shown in this study encompasses contextual aspects, which, as Tait (2000) and Soudien (2007) caution, influences learning in complex and significant ways and should therefore not be ignored when examining students’ learning experiences. In the interviews, students frequently referred to a myriad of environmental aspects that impacted negatively on their learning.

The issue of the geographic distance was raised as pertinent by both rural and township students in the interviews. Students from the rural areas, in particular, felt that they were overlooked and marginalized. As this student indicates, she thinks that as a distance learner she is disadvantaged and not acknowledged:

It seems that we are forgotten by the institution. Nobody even knows that we exist. Living far from the university is a big problem. (RF4)

For these students the assumption is that even though they are registered students they do not feel that they are part of the student body because the institution has little or no contact with them. In both instances students still cling to the idea that learning is about having a personal interaction with lectures. Similarly, students from the townships also echoed the need for more and frequent face-to-face interactions with the lecturers. Comments about attending lectures daily were quite common during the focus group interviews. Students expressed the need for contact tuition because they found it difficult to engage with the study guides, and had difficulties with understanding the course content and often required assistance. They were thus disappointed to learn that daily lectures were not offered as this township student indicates:

I also thought we had classes during the week. I bought a monthly ticket for the train so that I can attend the lessons. But, I was surprised that there were no classes for us. (TF11)

These ODL students see the geographic location, that is, townships and rural areas, as a problem that impacts negatively on their success. For them, ODL advances learning as a linear and individualistic process that isolates and marginalises them. Participants in this study felt that they were not only physically cut off from the institution, but were also socially deprived, since they could not communicate with lecturers and associate with other students; thus, negating the general assumption that when students register in ODL contexts, they have an understanding of what learning in such a context entails, and confirming Moore’s (2003) argument that for these students, the geographic distance can result in a —psychological‖ and ‖communication‖ detachment that might create —a space of potential misunderstandings‖.
A practical illustration of the extent to which students view the geographic distance as problematic at UNISA is that over the years they have chosen to find rented accommodation in the vicinity of the main campus, UNISA Mucleneuck Campus in Pretoria. For these students, learning is contextualised in terms of close contact with the institution, that is, daily access to resources such as study areas, the library, lecturers and other students in the vicinity. This has become a dilemma for the institution because now students require a study area for daily use and also expect lecturers to attend to them on demand and on a daily basis. Thus, an understanding of students' geographic location as a socio-cultural phenomenon is important for ensuring successful student access in ODL contexts.

The Social Aspects

Closely linked to the environmental aspect of geographic distance are social aspects that comprise relationships an individual forges with others in the family and the community as well as available support structures. As Vygotsky (1930/1978) points out, individuals experience and thus give meaning to learning in terms of their external social world. Coming from families with no history of participation in higher education, students in this study experienced the university culture as foreign and difficult to understand. They also received little or no support from their communities. As this student points out, neither her family nor community was sympathetic to her individual needs as a student:

I don't get much support at home and the community is worse, they are not supportive – not at all. I mean they will not give you time off to attend to your schoolwork; they'll always expect you to be present when there is an event in the community. I think if I had classes to go to, things would have been a bit different because they could see me leaving the house, but if I am in the house and I tell them that I have to prepare for my exams – they will not take kindly to that (RF10)

In this instance the student experiences conflict. On the one hand she cannot defy her family and neglect her responsibilities but on the other hand she is anxious since she has her studies to attend to. The lack of family support suggests that students cannot prioritise their studies with confidence, since such actions are likely to cause friction in the family. Students' experiences confirm Vygotsky's (1934/1986) argument that the individual as the learner and the context are intertwined. As studies elsewhere show, the difficulty for these students is that family expectations and acceptance tends to take precedence over their studies (Alison and Katjan, 2000; Makoe, 2006; Usun 2006).

Social contact is closely linked with geographic location because both entail the availability of and accessibility to the institution, resources and, specifically, as this study revealed, lecturers and fellow students. Rural students identified the lack of social contact with lecturers and other students as problematic, and expressed the need to communicate regularly with their lecturers, in particular:

My biggest frustration is lack of communication, not being able to talk to my lecturers. And also not having resources, such as libraries, books, learning centres and not having lecturers come down here and meet with us so that we can see who we are dealing with. For now, I feel like we are forgotten by the institution. (RF5)
In the same way, township students also expressed the need for more contact with their lecturers and other students, even though, unlike the rural students, they were more privileged in that they had access to weekly tutorials at UNISA’s learning centres. They found the hour-long tutorial sessions offered at UNISA insufficient, and expressed the need for longer and frequent contact sessions:

I attend tutorials once a week every Saturday. But the time is too short and I am not able to talk to the tutor about the questions I have. I think we need more than one lecture on this course for students who are in tutorial groups. We need enough time to talk to the tutors at the end of the lecture. This will help us to achieve very good results in the examination. (TF7).

UNISA provides group discussions for students once or twice a year. For example, for each discussion session, two-hour lectures are organised per module each semester for first-year students. Students expressed their appreciation and valued, as well as looked forward, to the group discussions because the sessions offered them the opportunity to satisfy the need to socialise, that is, meet with lecturers and other students. Some students also felt the need for frequent discussions with their peers and organised study groups amongst themselves as this rural confirms.

When you are alone sitting with your study guide, you always need help. It helps to be part of a group. We were six in my group and met regularly and that helped in working with other people and solving problems ... you don’t feel alone (RF12).

Experiences of this nature confirm other international studies that contend that because students were socialized to be group learners they found engaging actively in individual learning particularly challenging (Alison and Katijan, 2000; Purdie & Hattie, 2002; Usun, 2006) and thus required active interaction with fellow students.

The Cultural Aspects

As indicated earlier the four themes are intertwined and overlap. In the same way, the social and cultural aspects have common aspects that cannot be simply separated. For this study, cultural aspects include the experience of relationships with significant others. As Bempechat & Abrahams (1999) contend, group interaction is central to the way students learn in their communities and find meaning. In these communities people rely on each other for support. As a result, students tend to rely extensively on the tutor or lecturer. These students equate independent and individualistic behaviour to social rejection. For these reasons students, especially female students from rural areas reported that community duties took precedence over their studies. They could not dissociate from their community responsibilities for fear of being marginalised and labelled proud or thinking themselves better than others. In this context, students consciously, albeit reluctantly, avoid being labelled and comply with societal practices.

When there is an event in the village, you can’t tell other women that you have to write an assignment or prepare for an exam – they simply won’t understand. So you are forced to abandon your school work and attend to the community needs, and maybe attend to your school work later when you have finished your community duties. Nobody really cares about whether you are
studying or not...Oh no, you can't tell people that you have to attend to your school work, it may be perceived as if you think you are better than other people or you are too proud to be associated with people like them. (RF7)

Because group interaction is central to the way they learn in their communities, meaning making for these students is influenced by explicit negotiations with family members, teachers and peers. Peers are the most influential group with whom they implicitly negotiated their understandings of the study materials. It is in these groups that —students are able to share their common beliefs about opportunity and education‖ (Bempechat & Abrahams, 1999, p. 856).

I joined a group when I moved to another town. And those people that were in my group motivated me to carry on – when you hear stories of people who have been studying for ten years with UNISA and still going. It motivates you. I couldn't have made it without my study group (RF2)

It is important to recognise culture and its role in dictating individual learning experience. As numerous studies reveal it is important that ODL institutions acknowledge and investigate students' culture and ways of learning before implementing intervention and support programs for these students (Makoe, 2006). These studies confirm the concerns raised by students in this study, which reveal that if students do not receive appropriate support they are likely not to succeed.

The Economic Aspects

Economic aspects deal with the financial implications of being a distance learner. Coming from low socio-economic environments, students felt that they were excluded from active participation. Specific and varied economic constraints were likely to have a negative influence on their approach to and performance in their studies. As various studies have indicated, the poor living conditions in townships and rural areas, fuelled by high unemployment levels, tend to impact negatively on students' potential to succeed at university (Lephalala, 2004). Participants revealed various economic constraints that they had to contend with, not only at university, but throughout their years of schooling.

I grew up in a family of three living with my grandmother...I started school at...I was walking about nine kilometre[s] every morning. I had to be late and tired. Before I can concentrate or cope and I have to rest first. I did break down during my schooling because of family and financial crisis. I have to recapture standard five after four years breakdown. I manage to do well from standard five until matric without fail. Again I broke down due to financial problems. (TF4)

These extracts are more telling of the barriers that are likely to impact on students in the course of their studies at university: the additional family responsibilities they have to carry, the poverty they experience on a daily basis, the lack of basic facilities and at times their fading hopes for a better future. Of concern is that as first-generation university students in their families and community students in this study, they are not likely to have role models who can encourage and motivate them to carry on despite the challenges. To address some of the students’ concerns for contact, UNISA holds group discussion twice a year and tutorials once a week on Saturdays. However, participants in this study found that the
additional costs for attending tutorials and group discussions were beyond their means. Some students found attending the tutorial costly, since they had to travel long distances to the nearest centre. Students' realities, as unemployed individuals, precluded them from accessing the services that could enhance their success.

I would like to attend the tutorials. But I am not working. I cannot pay the tuition fees. The taxi to travel to the centre is expensive for me. I have to spend at least R20.00 to get to the centre every Saturday. I tried applying for a bursary but I was told that I did not qualify, it was not available for access students. Why can't we have a centre in Hammanskraal? It will be easier for many students. (TF2)

The findings suggest that the impact of the political and economic environment on students' learning should be considered as posited by proponents of the socio-cultural perspective (Cole, 2003; Scribner, 1997). For these students, the realisations that studying in an ODL context does not necessarily translate into lower fees was a frustrating experience. On the contrary, considering that students tend to be unemployed and live in informal settlements where they have limited access to essential and basic facilities - like electricity and computers – it is clear that an ODL context might only serve to compound their disadvantages.

**Implications for Practice**

Students perceived their geographic distance as a problem and felt abandoned, alienated, insecure, frustrated and helpless. They also perceived themselves as socially deprived, because they had little or no contact with lecturers and other students. The geographic distance, societal and cultural and economic aspects delineating students' learning experiences that are discussed in this study are intertwined. The common thread through all of them was the students' need for interaction with their lecturers, as sources of information, and peers, as sources of support. Most students felt isolated, alone and unable to access educational resources as they would like to.

To address the problem of isolation, students reported that they joined informal study groups. This is neither encouraged nor discouraged by the university. In so doing, —students can feel immediate identification with others in their group and so lose feelings of isolation and overanxiety‖ (Thorpe 1998, 84).

It is in these study groups that students adopt a communal approach to learning by sharing responsibility for reading and explaining what the course material entails (Lentell and O'Rourke, 2004). Thus, supporting the view that relationship building is of the utmost importance in their culture and context. The implication is that lecturers should allow students to form and develop relationships prior to engaging them in collaborative activities. Student should work in small groups and lecturers should monitor the nature and the scope of teamwork. Although it is essential to encourage teamwork, it is equally important to recognise individual differences in cultural groups so that lecturers do not subscribe to the —fallacy of homogeneity or the fallacy of monolithic identity (the assumption that individuals in groups have no differential identities)‖ (Gunawardena et al. 2001,117).

Since distance education at UNISA tends to be mostly print based, Holmberg (1985) suggests that distance education courses should follow the principles of guided didactic
conversation in the development of the study material to help motivate students to engage in more depth with their studies than they would if the course had an impersonal textbook character. Holmberg's (1985) principles include: accessible presentation of the study material; explicit advice and suggestions to students and the involvement of students emotionally so that they take personal interest in the subject. In ODL institutions such as UNISA, students are expected to read their study material and send in assignments for assessment purposes. This system assumes that students have the ability to read critically and work through the study material independently, confirming Holmberg's (1985) assertion that distance study assumes student autonomy. However, as this study reveals, students still found it difficult to study on their own because they came from a culture where learning usually take place in the classroom and is guided by teachers. As a result, they were disappointed and frustrated when they found themselves in an environment that did not offer face-to-face tutoring.

To address the issue of face-to-face tutoring, UNISA's 2007 ODL report suggested a new tutor system wherein a personal tutor would be appointed to each student to provide support for that student. Tutors would also be expected to mark assignments and provide feedback to students. The new tutor system is seen as being—at the heart of learner support] (Tait 2000). However, as Lentell and O'Rourke (2004) warn, although this system might work well in Western educational institutions, it may not necessarily be appropriate in non-Western societies. An efficient and effective support system should be grounded in the strength of the student context. It is about time, according to Lentell and O'Rourke (2004), that developing countries start researching other models and methods of providing student support, especially in situations where institutions have to provide for large numbers of students.

One area that still needs further exploration in terms of enhancing social interaction is the use of technologies, particularly cell phones. Despite evidence that shows that cellular phones have been used successfully by other industries, such as banking, and the retail and health sectors, education institutions have been slow to embrace technology as a viable way of providing and enhancing learning in ODL. Most people in South Africa including those living in remote rural areas, own a cellphone. More than 90% of UNISA staff and students have access to cell phones that can be used for teaching and learning. Keegan (2005: 3) believes that—it is not technologies with inherent pedagogical qualities that are successful in distance education, but technologies that are generally available to citizens]. Cell phones are the most accessible technology for students. The challenge is to come up with innovative ways to use these technologies to enhance teaching and learning.

**Conclusion**

When students talk about their experiences they refer to their previous perspectives, self-perceptions, relationship shifts and how they developed meaning for their new identity (Stevens, 2003). This confirms Vygotsky's (1934/1984) view that meaning is gleaned from experience. For rural and township distance learners, learning is a dynamic interaction between the individual and the physical, cultural, social and economic environment with which that individual interacts. Experiences of learning are based on complex and multiple contexts in which human development takes place (Bempechat & Abrahams, 1999). As Rogoff (1995) contends, students' socio-cultural contexts are dynamic and shaped from three phases, namely, the personal, the interpersonal-social and the community-
institutional. This confirms Alfreds’ (2003) assertion that the socio-cultural perspective does not see individuals and their cognitive views as separate, but represents them together, as one of the many factors influencing learning. The socio-cultural framework provided a useful perspective that helped illuminate some of the most critical issues affecting the learning experience of South African distance students. It also holds promise for incorporating multiple world-views in ODL contexts.

Students’ experiences in this study revealed aspects of their socio-cultural contexts, which tend to be marginalised and taken-for-granted at the institutional level. Their experiences both echo and question the role and effectiveness of ODL institutions in facilitating student access. It is clear that if ODL institutions are supposed to overcome disadvantages of various kinds of barriers to traditional university study, then students’ socio-cultural contexts will need to be recognised. Hence, knowledge of students’ socio-cultural contexts will have an impact on the policy of the institution. This, in turn, will influence teaching and learning in ODL settings. This means that if student access is to be established in a stronger and more visible position at the institutional level, then there is a need for further studies to examine practical ways in which students’ social, cultural and economic experiences can be fully integrated into the teaching and learning processes.

Underlying these findings are the broader tensions and struggles, reflecting the South African sociohistorical context. The real issue of access lies in considering students’ individual experiences in the light of wider social and economic implications. To establish access with success requires an understanding of students’ lived experiences, which currently seem to be beyond institutional considerations. While daunting, the practical implications of the impact the sociocultural environment has on learning cannot be ignored but will have to be addressed if ODL is to be integral in facilitating access and widening participation in higher education.

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