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A phenomenological analysis of experiences of learning in the South African distance education context

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This paper looks at the lifeworlds of 15 women who live in South African rural areas who by virtue of being distance learners share educational experiences of learning through distance. Distance learning takes place within different environments that are influenced by the social, cultural and political fields in which a student lives. The aim of this study is to investigate the conditions under which distance learning occurs and how they influence students’ experiences of learning. Giorgi’s phenomenological psychology analysis is used to explore learners’ histories and aspirations as they negotiate the meaning they attach to their learning experiences in a distance education context. In their narratives of their learning experiences, the women in this paper are consistently struggling to reconstruct themselves as distance learners and as members of the community that put a lot of pressures on them as “women in the village”, “mothers” and “role models”. The findings suggest that lack of resources; the distance between the institution and their homes; communication barriers between the lecturers and the students; limited support from the institution and the community; and time management affect their participation and performance in distance education.

Keywords: Distance education, phenomenological analysis, students experiences

Introduction

Distance education was identified by the South African government as a system that can expand educational opportunities and provide access to people who would not have had the opportunities to study full time (DoE, 1996; CHE, 2004). Through distance education, poorer students who live in remote rural places can have access to higher education without relocating away from family and community (CHE, 2004). Since 1994, distance education has been responsible for a large share of increased participation in higher education from just over 104,000 head-count enrolments in 1990 to over 270,000 in 2005. Black students had an overall share of 62.2% of distance programme enrolments. About 80% students were over 23 years of age, more than half were women (DoE, 2005). Distance education institutions enrolments constituted about 36 percent of all higher education students in the country (Glennie & Bialobrzeska, 2006). However, increasing access to higher education can only be successful if distance education providers understand the varying contexts and needs of their learners.

Distance learning takes place within different contexts that are influenced by the social, cultural and political fields in which a student lives. The context is a dynamic concept that is comprised of personal and environmental aspects that interact with one another. Cole (2003) refers to context as a set of circumstances, separate from the individual, with which the individual interacts and which are said to influence an individual in various ways. Context provides the setting for examining experience while the environment and the community shape learning. To understand the learning experience as a phenomenon, it is important to
consider the relationships between learning and education, political and economic systems of the society (Grenfell & James, 1998). The aim of this paper is to report on South African distance learners’ account of their experiences of learning. Giorgi’s phenomenological method was used to uncover the meaning of learning as experienced by distance learners. The aim is to answer the following key questions:

What are the experiences of learning for South African distance learners?
What are the conditions under which distance learning occurs?

Students learning is influenced by diverse discourses, representations, traditions, and legal and moral customs which shape the way a person imagines and experiences learning (Ratner, 1991). The task of phenomenology in this regard is to investigate whatever is given, that is, something that is perceived, remembered, represented in order to reveal its structure (Giorgi, 1983, 1999).

**Giorgi’s phenomenological psychology**

The purpose of Giorgi’s phenomenological psychology research is “to capture as closely as possible the way in which the phenomenon is experienced” (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003b, p.27). In Giorgi’s work, phenomenology is used to look for the psychological meanings that constitute the phenomenon in the participants’ lifeworld. The idea is to study how individuals live, that is how they behave and experience situations (Giorgi, 1985). Their descriptions are based on their experiences within the context in which the experience is taking place. Central to this research is the lived context of the individual. The meaning of the phenomenon such as learning can only be revealed in its totality and its relationships with its particulars and therefore essences can only be seen in every constituent of the meaning.

Learning as described by a learner should be viewed as an integral activity in and with the world at all times. The distance learners’ experiences of learning are determined by their interpretation of their environment. The aim is to elicit the experience of the respondents so that the phenomenon of learning can be revealed. “The outcome of the analysis is based on the psychological meaning discriminations performed by the researcher, and these are not explicitly stated as such by the individuals having experienced it” (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003a, p.249). The role of the phenomenological analysis in this regard is to discern the psychological essence of the phenomenon (Giorgi, 1985; 1989).

The process of research in phenomenological psychology starts with the description of a situation as experienced in daily life (Giorgi, 1985). In trying to obtain these descriptions, a researcher sets aside any prior thoughts or judgement about the phenomenon under study. In so doing, the researcher brackets the phenomenon. The bracketing or the epoche is primarily undertaken in order to reveal the personal reality of the individual for whom the phenomenon under study appears (Ashworth, 1999). What need to be bracketed are those presuppositions that have to do with claims made from objective science or other authoritative sources (Giorgi, 1986; Ashworth, 1999). Phenomenology attempts to offer insightful descriptions of the way the world is experienced prereflectively rather than the way is conceptualised, categorised or reflected on (Van Manen, 1990). In this context, the distance learner is at the centre of the inquiry. The idea is to explicate multiple ways of interpreting events for each person and show how these interpretations constitute reality (Giorgi, 1986).
Participants and data collection

The analysis draws on semi-structured interviews conducted with 15 black women who live in remote rural areas and who are distance learners at the University of South Africa (UNISA), the oldest and the largest distance education provider in Africa. The average age of women interviewed was 32 and most of them were working as teachers. A substantial number of UNISA’s students are women who live in rural areas, although it is difficult to ascertain this because statistics provided in education “are often not gender (and region) segregated” (Sehoole & Moja, 2003, p.486). Secondly, being a woman made it easier for me to have access into the lives of female students in the rural community. Thirdly, it is easier for women of the same age groups to talk to each other than it is for other age groups. Age is very important component in this culture; people tend to be more comfortable amongst people of the same age range. From young age, children from the same sex and age are raised together and it is within this group that people are allowed to challenge each other (Sawadogo, 1995).

Data analysis

Data analysis was based on Giorgi’s phenomenological psychological analysis as described below:

Step 1: Getting the sense of the whole
The entire interview protocol was read several times in order to get a sense of the whole experience. The idea was to obtain a description, not to explain or construct (Giorgi, 1989). Giorgi (1986) and Wertz (1985) suggest that readers should see raw data as well as processed data. However, it is not possible to present raw data as it is in this paper given the space constraints.

Step 2: Discrimination of meaning units
After going through the first step, Giorgi (1986) suggests that the whole description should be broken into several parts to determine the meaning of the experience and these are expressed by the slashes in the texts (Giorgi, 1985) or by numbering of lines (Wertz,1985 ). Parts that were relevant to the phenomenon that is being studied were then identified. The process of delineating parts is referred to as meaning units, they express the participant’s own meaning of the experience, and they only become meaningful when they relate to the structure of all units (Ratner, 2001). A word, a sentence or several sentences may constitute a meaning unit. Each meaning unit is constituent and therefore focuses on the context of the text (Giorgi, 1985).

The meaning units are correlated with the researcher’s perspective and therefore two researchers may not have identical meaning units (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003a). This process takes place within what is called reduction. It is important in phenomenological psychology to withhold the existential judgment about the experience of the participant. For the purposes of this study, the first 10 meaning units from Noma’s (all names have been changed to protect the participant’s identity) interview data. Noma, who was one of the participants in the study, has been studying with UNISA since1990. She completed her bachelor’s degree in 1998 and she was doing a postgraduate diploma in education at the time of the interview.
Interviewer: What are your experiences as a distance learner?

Noma:

1. What can I say ... about distance learning ... I think it is good.
2. There are disadvantages as you can imagine – otherwise I like it.
3. One of the main disadvantages is that if you are studying and you live quite far from the institution,
4. you are always concerned with whether you are doing things right ... and you never know where you are with your work.
5. There are many problems about ... well I think the problems are about where you live ...
6. You see I live in the rural areas. I come from ... one of the remotest rural villages.
7. When I started studying with UNISA, we didn’t have phones, we didn’t have postal services, the roads were bad and we couldn’t drive – in fact, there were no roads to speak of and there was no transport - you had to walk everywhere.
8. For postal services, we had to rely on the local owner of the shop who would take our mail once a week when he had to go into the city.
9. It was very difficult to communicate during those days when we didn’t even have cell phones.
10. This was such a big problem for me because he (shop owner) only went to the city once a week and …

Step 3: Transformation of the lived experience into psychological language

In this step, the delineated meaning units identified in the previous step were transformed into the “language of psychology that is currently tied to psychological perspectives (behaviourism, psychoanalysis and so on)” (Giorgi, 1985, p.19). In the analysis, the researcher looks for ‘perceptions’ and ‘emotions’ that are expressed by the participants’ description in order to come up with the findings (Giorgi, 1985). It is at this point that the psychological intentions that are contained in the meaning of the description were developed. This step involved a transformation where the participant’s first person own everyday expression is changed into a psychological scientific language, which is in third person. The idea was to interrogate the meaning units for what they reveal about the concept of learning. A part of the delineated meaning units was used below to show the transformation process.

When Noma was asked about her experiences of distance learning…

She was not sure how to answer the question …after a long pause; she attempted to clarify what she intended to respond to. She then decided to respond to the question on distance learning. Although she considers distance learning good, she acknowledges that there are disadvantages to studying at a distance – one of which had to do with the geographical distance between the institution and the place where she lived.

Step 4: Individual description of the situation

After the transformation process, the meaning units of each description were then synthesized in order to make a descriptive statement of the particular and specific characteristics of each participant (Giorgi, 1989). The idea is to ensure that the “structure express the essential network of relationships among the parts so that the total psychological meaning can stand out” (Giorgi, 1989, p73). This step involves understanding, judgments of relevance, and coherent organising; it draws implicitly on the special interest of the researcher (Wertz, 1985).

Since the interview is a conversation, descriptions of matter are usually not coherent and sometimes they are not essentially related to the phenomenon that is investigated. What was said about learning and being a learner tended to involve repetition, it jumped around,
backtracked, and thus the movement of the description did not coincide neatly with the lived experience. It is at this point, where relevant constituents are put together according to their intertwining meanings so that they can express lived experience. Although Meaning Unit 1-10 did not express anything about the learning experiences per se, they were judged as relevant in this case because firstly they gave an overview of Noma’s experience and how her environment affected the process of learning. When Noma was asked about her experiences as a distance learner, she reflected on it by giving a detailed picture of how her environment looked like. People tend to reflect on the past when asked about their experiences. It is through this description that we get the picture of what learning meant for an individual.

This process included the context, the discourse and certain background knowledge that makes the utterances identifiable and therefore calls for a good deal of prior cultural knowledge (Ratner, 2001). This step was essential in terms of understanding, looking out for the relevance and organising the structure coherently. However, this process was purely subjective and there are no right or wrong answers.

**Step 5: The general description of the situated structures**

Once the description of the psychological structure of each individual had been identified, the researcher looked at statements that can be taken as true in most cases. Although individuals have idiosyncratic social experience, they are part of the practices and values that pervade the psychological activity of most people (Ratner, 1991). It is at this point of the analysis where each individual structure is compared to others to establish similarities and differences in meaning constituents (Wertz, 1985).

From meaning unit 4 “you are always concerned with whether you are doing things right ... and you never know where you are with your work.” Central themes such as “being insecure” and “lack of guidance” were identified. These themes dealt with the feeling of not having someone to turn to for help and thus render the experience of learning strange. Identified themes from each participant are clustered into a number of general themes that appeared to be common to all the participants’ descriptions (Pietersen, 2002). The idea was to link identified themes to meaning units. Table 1 below shows meanings that belong to the specific constituent of the experience of the learning regarding the environment in which learning takes place.
Table 1: Description of the situated structure of the lived space experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situated structure of the experience</th>
<th>Identification numbers of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Physical distance</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No classroom</td>
<td>S1, S7, S9, S10, S15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of infrastructure - postal services, roads, telephones etc.</td>
<td>S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S7, S10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to resources</td>
<td>S3, S4, S5, S7, S9, S10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study material</td>
<td>S3, S5, S7, S8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance from the learning centres</td>
<td>S4, S7, S11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social distance</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact with lectures</td>
<td>S1, S3, S9, S12, S15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studying without guidance from lecturers</td>
<td>S5, S7, S10, S11, S13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication with lecturers</td>
<td>S1, S3, S8, S9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone costs</td>
<td>S1, S3, S4, S11, S15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for tutorials</td>
<td>S1, S3, S7, S9, S12, S14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travelling time and accommodation costs</td>
<td>S4, S7, S9, S12, S14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of communication with other students</td>
<td>S2, S3, S7, S8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study group</td>
<td>S1, S2, S5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of flexibility</td>
<td>S3, S5, S4, S8, S9, S10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better suited for older students</td>
<td>S4, S15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cater for younger students needs</td>
<td>S9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S6, S9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Constituents of experiences

In classifying the general meaning units into themes, every meaning unit was put into a specific constituent. It is important that the psychological analysis remain faithful to the subjects’ statement (Ratner, 2001). The aim of phenomenological patterns is to describe the aspect of the lived experience (van Manen, 1990). Based on this analysis, the experience of learning for South African distance learners can be described in specific constituents of:

- the lived space: the physical environment in which learning takes place; the distance between the area in which the learner lives and the institution and the availability of resources in that environment.
- the lived selfhood: the experience of one’s character and personality in regards to her psychological predispositions to the phenomenon under study.
- the lived time: the chronological dimensions of past experiences and how those experiences have influenced the present and how they may affect the future
- the lived social relations: the experience of relationship with significant others; this also deals with issues of support and communication.

The lived space

For most students formal learning takes place within the confines of a specific building – a classroom. In conventional classroom teachers and learners, occupy the same space. In distance learning, the physical space set aside for the learning activity is missing. As a result, distance learning is in conflict with students’ existing conceptions of the environment in which formal learning takes place. The issue of the geographic distance was raised by most of the learners who resided in remote rural parts of South Africa. The participants in this study...
felt that they are not only physically cut off from the institution, but deprived socially from having contacts with other learners and lecturers.

**Naledi:** Sometimes I feel it would have been better if lecturers were close by or we had regular tutorials. Distance is a big problem

The geographic distance and physical setting in which learning takes place impacts on learners’ experiences. In this instance, it was helpful to inquire into the nature of the lived space that renders that particular experience its quality of meaning.

**The lived selfhood**
This theme had to do with the relationship between the participants’ sense of identity; psychological feelings; and their own presence and voice in relation to the phenomenon under study. Students in this study are first generation university students in their families and community and therefore, they do not have role models or anyone to share their experiences with. They found that their sense of self in relation to their role as students is “fractured and disabled” (Stevens, 2003, p.238). Most of them chose not to talk about their studies with families and friends; they were afraid that they might be perceived as “proud”. They were doing something that was not done by others in their community as a result they never talked about their participation in higher education.

**Lele:** When there is an event in the village, you can’t tell other women that you have to write an assignment or prepare for exam – they simply won’t understand. So you are forced to abandon your schoolwork and attend to the community needs, and maybe attend to your schoolwork 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.

However, these women continued to study in secret because it gave them a sense of empowerment and accomplishment. For these students, the personal benefits of learning and acquiring a higher education qualification are associated with personal fulfilment, improving oneself and upward social mobility.

**The lived social relations**
One area that students identified as problematic in their experience of distance learning was lack of social relations with significant others. Almost all students in this study felt the need to communicate especially with their lecturers. Students who do not make connections with other students and lecturers feel isolated and stressed.

**Ntombi:** My biggest frustration is lack of communication, not being able to talk to my lecturers. And 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 university.

Most of the students reported lack of confidence in interpreting study material; lack of guidance on how to go about with their studying; and lack of ability to ask questions immediately as in face-to-face setting. These problems were further exacerbated by the fact that most black students enter institutions of higher learning with little reading and writing
skills, and they are often not fluent and proficient in English, the language used in academic work.

To overcome this problem most learners reported that they turned to peers for support. Most of them belonged to informal study groups because they needed someone whom they can share their fears and aspirations with. It is in these groups where distance learners felt that they could define themselves as learners. Group interaction is central to the way they learn in their communities.

The lived time

Most women found that they had to juggle their schoolwork with competing priorities. Their family and community commitments tended to take precedence over their time to study. Several studies on women who study through distance attest to the fact that most women have to shoulder multiple duties of work, study, family and community responsibilities (Heron, 1997; May 1994). Most of them study when they are finished with all other duties. Women in other studies reported that they attended to their studies after everybody had been fed, looked after, and gone to bed (May, 1994).

Zenani: Although there is no time – I try hard to make time. Whenever I find a little time that, I could call my own I take a book and try to read two or three pages, usually it means sacrificing my bedtime.

Despite all these women, seem to be grateful that distance learning accorded them an opportunity to adapt their study schedules around their multiple activities.

Discussion and conclusion

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). What emerged in this study is that students’ experiences of learning were viewed in relation to their hopes, frustrations, intentions and histories. For these students distance learning was a lonely process where they felt physically, emotionally and socially cut out. In the absence of communication with the people who are supposed to enhance their experience of learning, they felt lonely, alienated, insecure and alone. To most learners in rural communities, learning is a collective social process whereby a student feels the need to interact with fellow students and teachers. 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).

For most students, the culture of learning independently without even meeting the person who teaches them was extremely problematic. In most African cultures dependency relationship are nurtured and strengthened between the child and the sources of knowledge throughout childhood to adulthood (Sawadogo 1995). A learner feels very much depended on the teacher. Independence reflects behaviours that only social rejects and marginalised individuals adopt to express themselves. That is why most women in the study could not excuse themselves from community duties because they were afraid that they may be viewed as “proud” or “better than others”. In this context, people consciously avoid being labelled as such.
For rural distance learners, learning is a dynamic interaction between the individual and her physical, cultural, social and political environment within which one interacts. The students understanding of learning experience was based on complex structures of multiple contexts in which human development takes place. In these structures, distance learners describe themselves in distinct, discrete lived worlds which include the world in relation to the self; the world in relation to the significant others; the world in relation to their environment; and their world in relation to time. The phenomenological approach provided a useful perspective that helped illuminate some of the most critical issues that affect the learning experience of South African distance learners.

Through this analysis, it was recognised that the lifeworld of the learners was largely shaped by the way they encounter and interpret the social process of learning in distance education. The general structure of the experiences of students in distance learning emerged from the identified themes. Giorgi’s phenomenological psychological method was useful in this study because (1) it provided a rigorous and systematic analysis of distance learners’ experiences; (2) it took subjective experiences as its main focus of study; (3) it clarified the essence of being a distance learner in a remote rural setting. Through this analysis, we were able to see how these women negotiated their understanding of themselves as distance learners in relation to the environments in which they found themselves.

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