



Using Phenomenological Psychology to Analyse Distance Education Students' Experiences and Conceptions of Learning

by Mpine Makoe

Abstract

Studies on learning have tended to endorse the importance of knowledge rather than the significance of the cultural contexts embedded in the different histories and biographies of learners. In order to investigate the relationship between these contexts and students' conceptions of learning, this study focuses on South African distance students' accounts of their personal experience and understanding of learning, using Giorgi's phenomenological psychology method to explore the learners' histories and aspirations as they construct and negotiate the meaning they attach to learning. The findings indicate that the social environment, the culture, the political milieu and economic conditions are the most important determinants of conceptions of learning, with all these multiple contexts interacting to influence students' beliefs about learning, which in turn affect their approach to learning and hence their learning outcomes. It is thus argued that, in order to facilitate distance learning, the lifeworld of the learner needs to be both understood and brought to bear on the educational process.

Introduction

The major challenge facing South African higher education today is to address the apartheid legacy through increasing the accessibility of education to those who were denied access in the past. Of particular concern to the South African government in this regard was evidence that suggested correlations exist between economic growth and participation in higher education; between technological development and global competitiveness; and between investment in human resources and social development (Bunting, 2004; Jansen & Taylor, 2003; Walters, 2004). It has been reported that low-income countries tend to have low participation rates in higher education while high-income countries have high participation rates in higher education (Walters, 2004).

Although there has been a tremendous increase in the

number of students in South African higher education, the gross participation rate of 15% still remains low when compared with other middle-income countries with a gross participation rate of 20%. The gross participation rate in high-income countries is just over 40%, and in low-income countries the gross participation rate is 5% (Badat, 2005; Bunting, 2004; Walters, 2004).

This low gross participation rate is what prompted the South African government to investigate ways in which to raise the higher education participation rate. Several policy documents were drawn up and distance education was identified as the system that could provide access to higher education for learners from disadvantaged communities (DoE, 1996; CHE, 2004). Distance education enrolment constituted about 36% of all higher education students in the country (Glennie & Bialobrzeska, 2006). It has been responsible for a large share of the increased

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participation from just over 104,000 student enrolments in 1990 to over 270,000 in 2005. Black students accounted for 62% of distance programme enrolments (DoE, 2006).

While there has been a growth in student numbers, there has not been a substantial increase in the output of successful students (CHE, 2004). The drop out rate of students from disadvantaged communities is particularly high. Institutions tend to attribute high drop out rates to students' personal circumstances. Most black students who participated in this study came from schools that were overcrowded, with extremely limited resources in terms of books and equipment, and had been taught by teachers who were inadequately trained. In addition, most of them were first-generation university students in their families. Typically, they came from homes where their parents were illiterate or semi-literate and never purchased or read books or newspapers. All these circumstances combined to produce people who were ill prepared for the demands of higher education.

The aim of this paper is to present the findings of a phenomenological analysis of South African distance learners' accounts of their experiences of learning. The way in which people understand learning influences their perceptions and interpretation of events and phenomena surrounding them. It is therefore important for teachers to be aware of students' conceptions of learning in order to know where changes can be made to improve teaching (Price & Richardson, 2003). Entwistle and Peterson (2004, p. 408) argue that conceptions are "developed in particular circumstances or contexts, and so are linked to those situations in people's minds". The context is a dynamic concept that comprises personal and environmental aspects interacting 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. This includes family, social and historical contexts that influence the child's development. It is within these contexts that distance education students construct and negotiate their own understanding of learning.

The aim of this study is to understand how distance learners respond to the following questions:

- What is learning?
- What is their understanding of learning?
- What are the conditions under which learning takes place?
- What are the facilitators or obstacles to the learning process? (Giorgi, 1999, p. 81).

Giorgi's phenomenological psychology research method, which aims to uncover, through the identification of essential themes, the meaning of a phenomenon as experienced by individuals, is used to analyse the students' responses.

Giorgi's Phenomenological Psychology

The task of phenomenological psychology is to capture as closely as possible the way in which the phenomenon is experienced (Giorgi, 1999; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). In Giorgi's work, phenomenology is used to uncover the psychological meanings that constitute the phenomenon in the participants' lifeworld. The idea is to study how individuals describe their experiences within the context in which the experience is taking place. Central to phenomenological psychology research is the lived context of the individual. The role of phenomenological analysis in this regard is to discern the psychological essence of the phenomenon (Giorgi, 1985, 1989; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003).

In developing his methodology, Giorgi positioned himself within phenomenological philosophy and drew on its four major characteristics to determine that the method should (1) be descriptive and qualitative; (2) have elements of reduction to it; (3) focus on essences; and (4) explicate intentionality. The purpose of phenomenological research is to produce a clear, precise, and systematic description of the meaning that constitutes the focal phenomenon (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 45).

The process of research in phenomenological psychology starts with the phenomenological "reduction", which means "to describe what is present without making the existential claim that is the way it is present" (Giorgi, 1985, p. 49). Reduction refers to a critical reflection on participants' descriptions of their experiences. In so doing, the researcher places the phenomenon in *epoché*, which implies setting aside any preconceptions or judgments s/he may have about the phenomenon. That way, the researcher is able to focus his or her attention on locating what is being questioned within its own context. The aim is to analyse and describe the experience as lived without contaminating it with personal or theoretical concepts. Reduction, in Giorgi's analysis, refers to the idea of taking the meaning of any experience exactly as it appears in consciousness.

Once the researcher has bracketed his or her judgments, s/he will want to get a sense of the whole interview by listening attentively to intonations, emphases and pauses in the interviewees' language.

This will provide a context for the emergence of specific units of meaning and themes (Hycner, 1985). In phenomenological psychology, the content is as important as the context. Therefore, the researcher “would seek a more contextualised, a more socialised and a more limited kind of invariant meaning of description” (Giorgi, 1989, p. 48).

From the perspective of phenomenological psychology, the learning experience – that is, what learning means – is the significant element in the way a participant (distance learner) thinks about his or her past and present and how s/he anticipates the future. To understand how South African distance learners determine their own reality as learners, we must try to enter that reality on its own terms and strive to comprehend how their conceptions of learning evolved and developed through experience. “Only the experience itself, purified as much as possible from any prejudice, counts as evidence” (Ashworth, 1996, p. 2). It is important, therefore, that the information given by the participants should not be questioned in terms of its correctness or its falsity; it should be taken to represent the lifeworld of the individual.

Participants and Data Collection

In order to understand distance education students’ experiences of learning, data was collected from 20 students at the University of South Africa (Unisa). The oldest and the largest distance education institution in Africa, Unisa currently has over 200,000 students. South African students in distance education are predominantly black (57% compared to 47% in face-to-face provision), and mostly women (61% compared to 53% in face-to-face provision) (Badat, 2005). Five men and five women interviewed came from the rural communities, representing a small minority of people from those communities who are participating in higher education. More than half of the population in rural communities is unemployed. People who tend to register at higher education institutions to study through distance education are mostly teachers. The average age of the men who were interviewed telephonically was 40, while the average age of the women who participated was 32.

While it was recognised that interviewing students from both rural and urban communities would be important in this study, the focus of the analysis presented is on students from rural areas, given that there are many factors that make studying particularly difficult for people living in rural areas. The specific geographic location of the learners impacts on the total learning experience and the success thereof.

While most people, especially women, who work and live in the rural areas have to deal with the daily survival of whole families by fulfilling obligations determined by the society they live in, they also take up part-time study. Tumi¹, one of the participants, was expected to spend most of her time doing household duties and attending to community needs. Since women of Tumi’s generation have tended to leave the rural communities to work in the cities, she finds that she is expected to play more than a teacher’s role. “In these communities you are expected to be a mother, a nurse, a social worker to the children you teach, and this leaves very little time to attend to your own work,” she said.

The sample under consideration was deliberately composed of black students who live in the rural areas because of both the geographical and the psychological distance that they have to endure in distance learning. The aim of the study was to investigate discourses through which these learners make meaning of their experiences as they learn. The idea was to interview people who would give detailed descriptions of their experiences of distance learning. Despite the small sample of students from a particular race and from a particular area, there are enough similarities in the sample make-up for an in-depth topic exploration, with a consistent emphasis on the students’ experiences of learning in distance education and their construction and negotiation of their understanding of learning.

What is important in capturing phenomenological interviews is to ensure that all students’ experiences are accounted for. However, it should be noted that the collected data is based on retrospective descriptions of the individual’s experiences (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). While the focus of this study was on how students described learning, I also looked at how learners experience learning in their environment, and how they embody the experience of learning as distance learners.

For Noma, distance education appears to have offered her a second chance in education. The flexible nature of distance education also allowed her to study anywhere and any time. Although she recognises the benefits of studying, she thinks that her experience would have been enhanced if her learning environment had

¹ All students who participated in the study were asked to read the consent form which outlines the aim of the research before signing it. Students were also told that they would not be identified in any form. Names of the participants have been changed to protect their identity.

the necessary infrastructure and resources. The first disadvantage is the physical environment in which her learning takes place. She explains why it is a problem to study in an area where there are no basic infrastructures such as roads, telephones, postal services – all the things a distance learner needs to communicate with the institution. To overcome this problem, Noma had to rely on the owner of the shop to post her assignments two weeks or even a month early to compensate for time delays. She was not only frustrated with the content of the study material, but she had to deal with how to get her work to the university on time. She also had to deal with her family and community who did not seem to understand her predicament. Despite these frustrations, anxieties and ambivalent feelings about her environment, Noma was determined to succeed

Data Analysis

Since it is not possible to present raw data from 20 participants in this paper given the space constraints, I am using an excerpt of Naledi's interview protocol to illustrate Giorgi's step-by-step analysis:

Naledi's responsibilities of being a mother, a teacher and a woman in the village made studying extremely difficult. She has been studying with Unisa since 1994. At times she had to put her studies on hold in order to support to her children both financially and emotionally. One of the main problems that Naledi identified was lack of communication between herself and the lecturers. Besides having to incur telephone and travelling costs to communicate with her lecturers, she found that lecturers were not accessible and supportive. She felt that people living in the rural areas were forgotten by the institution.

Although she had very little support from the institution and the community, she still felt that it was her responsibility to learn in order to help her community. Being the first person in her community to go to university, she saw learning as an opportunity to fulfil her dream of gaining a qualification that will give her the skills to work with the community in a meaningful way. Although she admits that her community puts lots of demands on her, she still feels obligated to attend to

community needs as well as studying.

Step 1: The first step in Giorgi's analysis involves reading the entire interview protocol in order to get a sense of the whole experience. This required reading the script several times. The idea was to obtain a description, not to explain or construct (Giorgi 1985, 1986, 1989; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). For the purposes of this study, the focus will be on excerpts from the interview data that had to do with the description of learning.

What is learning?

Learning is something ... I don't know how to put it ... it is lifelong ... as long as your mind is still functioning you are gaining new knowledge that you need at all times. It is only through learning that I can improve myself and keep abreast of what is happening around me. If you don't study you become dull.

What is your understanding of learning?

To me Naledi – learning means everything, learning and studying go hand in hand/. I learn by practical experience – I get information every day, whenever I interact with others I'm always learning. Learning is not a textbook thing, you are learning all the time.

Step 2: After reading the interview protocol several times, the second step is to break the whole description into several parts in order to determine the meaning expressed in every word, phrase or sentence while staying very close to the literal data. In identifying meaning units, I went through the text again, looking specifically for the transitions and numbering them as suggested by Wertz (1985). The idea is to show that the data has been carefully treated and accounted for.

1. Learning is something ...
2. I don't know how to put it ...
3. it is lifelong ...
4. as long as your mind is still functioning
5. you are gaining new knowledge
6. that you need at all times
7. It is only through learning that I can improve myself
8. and keep abreast of what is happening around me
9. If you don't study you become dull.
10. To me Naledi –
11. learning means everything
12. learning and studying go hand in hand

- 13. I learn by practical experience
- 14. I get information every day
- 15. whenever I interact with others
- 16. I'm always learning
- 17. Learning is not a textbook thing
- 18. you are learning all the time.

Step 3: Once the meaning units had been delineated, I went through all the meaning units and expressed the psychological insight contained in each one of them more directly. Relevant constituents were regrouped according to their intertwining meanings to consolidate their expression of lived experience (Wertz, 1985). Meaning units that had related content were thus clustered together.

It was at this stage that I wanted to determine if central themes emerged from these clusters. It should be noted that some ambiguities and overlapping between clusters became evident during this process, indicating that the process is not clear and neat. Another researcher may thus come up with slightly different clusters (Hycner, 1985). The goal of clustering the constituent meaning units was to make explicit what was implicit in order to allow the analysis to reveal meanings that are lived but not clearly articulated (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). This stage is essential in terms of understanding, looking out for relevance and organising the structure coherently.

Table 1 below shows the clusters of meaning units that emerged as relevant to the research question and the central themes that emanated from the clustered meaning units.

Table 1: Clusters of meaning units and central themes

Clusters of meaning units	Central themes
1. Learning is something ... 2. I don't know how to put it... 10. To me Naledi –	Lack of clarity
3. it is lifelong ... 4. as long as your mind is still functioning 6. that you need at all times 8. and keep abreast of what is happening around me 11. learning means everything 14. I get information every day 16. I'm always learning 18. you are learning all the time.	Happens all the time
7. It is only through learning that I can improve myself 8. and keep abreast of what is	Improving oneself

happening around me 10. To me Naledi –	
12. learning and studying go hand in hand 17. Learning is not a textbook thing	Formal learning
13. I learn by practical experience 14. I get information every day 15. whenever I interact with others I'm always learning	Practical experience

Step 4: This step involves understanding, judgments of relevance, and coherent organising; it draws implicitly on the special interest of the researcher (Wertz, 1985). It offers individual descriptions which serve as the basis of further analysis. In that this process is purely subjective, different researchers may arrive at slightly different descriptions. Below is the idiographic analysis of Naledi's description of learning.

Specific Description of Situated Structure

When asked what learning is, Naledi struggles to describe learning, she finds it hard to come up with words that describe or define learning. She eventually attempts to describe it as lifelong and still she is not convinced that this is what she wants to say learning is; she tries to explain what she meant by "lifelong", saying learning is something that happens when your mind is functioning. She eventually finds words that she thinks may capture her description of learning after a bit of struggle in the beginning. She then describes learning as gaining knowledge that you are going to use at all times. She recognizes that it is only through learning that one can improve oneself while keeping abreast of what is happening around one. She sees learning as the same as studying.

In answering the question about her understanding of learning, Naledi starts by asking for clarification in terms of whether the question is directed to her personally or whether it is a question probing general knowledge about learning. In other words, does the question ask for her personal opinion about learning? She probably assumed that the first question was about learning as defined and described in the

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textbook and that the second question is about her understanding of learning as an individual. To her, as Naledi, learning means everything, and she sees it as going hand in hand with studying. She does not separate studying from learning. For learning to occur, it must involve practical experience. Learning also has to do with interaction with others in order to get information. Therefore, learning is not confined to formal learning where you learn from textbooks; learning can also be informal, meaning that learning takes place all the time.

From this brief protocol of Naledi’s description of learning, four themes emerged. The first theme dealt with learning as an active process; the second one focused on gaining knowledge; the third theme had to do with improving oneself; and the last theme focused on social interaction as an aspect of learning.

Step 5: Once all the above steps had been repeated with each of the 20 students interviewed, I then looked at statements that can be taken as true in most cases. Although individuals have idiosyncratic social experiences, 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 that I compared each individual structure to the others in order to establish similarities and differences in meaning constituents (Wertz, 1985). In order to understand the experiences of distance learners, I had to move from the individual phenomenological structure to the general description of situated structures. To achieve the generality beyond the individual cases, I looked at all possible variations that were relevant to the students’ experiences of distance learning. It is through this process that several central themes were identified from each participant and then clustered into a number of general themes that appeared to be common to all the participants’ descriptions.

Meaning units that focused on students’ experiences were used as a guide to understand their conception of learning. In this analysis, the participants expressed 48 meaning units pertaining to the concept of learning. Transformed general themes were divided into seven specific constituents. Every meaning unit that was expressed by the individual was fitted into one of the seven types of the constituents. *Table 2* below shows the list of the units including meanings that belong to the specific constituents of conceptions of learning. The numbers 1,2,3, ... , preceded by the letter P for Participant, indicate the code allocated to each student in

accordance with the order in which s/he was interviewed.

Table 2: Concepts of learning for each participant

Constituents	Participants
Gaining knowledge	P1, P2, P3, P5, P6, P7, P9, P10, P12, P13, P14, P15, P16, P18, P19
Contributing to the community	P2, P3, P6, P7, P8, P9, P12, P13, P15, P17, P20
Improving oneself	P1, P3, P4, P5, P7, P8, P9, P11, P13, P14, P18, P19
Social interaction	P1, P4, P5, P9, P10, P11, P12, P13, P18, P20
Skills acquisition	P2, P3, P5, P7, P9, P10, P11, P12, P15, P18, P19
Practical application	P1, P2, P7, P9, P11, P14, P15, P17
Active process	P1, P4, P9, P11, P13, P16

Discussion on Conceptions of Learning

What emerged from previous studies conducted by Makoe (2006, 2007) was that students responded differently to a question on “what is learning” than to one on “what is your understanding of learning”. Most responses to the first question on “what is learning” were terse. Some of the students solicited feedback as they were trying to formulate the ‘right’ answer to the question. Most of them responded to this question in a formal or objective way. They talked about learning as “gaining knowledge”, “acquisition of information”, “accumulating knowledge and skills”, and so forth. Most of their responses focused on the quantitative nature of learning.

In responding to the second question on “what is *your* understanding of learning”, the students felt that they could talk about their personal or subjective understanding of learning. In their responses, they talked about their personal orientation to learning and what learning means to them. To most students, learning meant empowerment or personal fulfilment or changing personal circumstances or having a responsibility to help their community. When Naledi was asked this question, she responded by asking: “*Do you mean what learning means to me, Naledi...?*” She felt that she had to identify herself with this question. She started her response by saying, “*To me Naledi, learning is*”. In general, it

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was found that students focused on their subjective goals and aspirations in respect of learning when they answered this question.

Since these students were neither engaged in a learning activity nor asked to refer to a situation in which they had learned, their initial description of learning may have been influenced by what they had read or heard about learning. It was only with the second question that they felt that the question was directed to them personally and that they could therefore describe learning the way they perceived it.

The key findings of this research suggest that South African distance students' conceptions of learning can be described as an active process of acquiring skills, gaining knowledge, applying the knowledge gained in practice, and improving oneself in order to contribute to the community.

Students in this study referred to learning as an active process because they saw learning as something that was not just related to reading books or attending lectures. They reported that, through learning, they were able to meet other people from other parts of the country. This proved to be helpful in terms of understanding what they were doing in the learning process. By identifying this conception, students believed that learning was evident in all aspects of life. They viewed learning as a lifelong process that happens both inside and outside the school. In learning, a person is an actor engaged in an activity in the world (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Learning should, therefore, be viewed as an integral activity in and with the world at all times.

The most common conception that was expressed by the participant learners, especially when answering the first question, had to do with gaining knowledge. This concept is not unique to this study. Alison and Katijin (2000), Boulton-Lewis, Marton, Lewis, and Wilss (2000), Cliff (1998), Morgan and Beaty (1997), Meyer (1997) and Säljö (1979) also reported that participants in their studies on students' conception of learning identified this concept. Säljö (1982) argued that gaining knowledge reflects learning where knowledge is transferred from an expert or teacher into the heads of the students. It seems that students participate in formal or higher education for the purpose of increasing their knowledge about the subject matter. This conception is associated with the quantitative process of learning whereby students absorb knowledge for the purpose of accumulating skills in order to apply them to practice.

Social interaction was also identified as a conception

of learning. There are several possible reasons why this conception assumes particular importance in this context. One of them may be that students, because of the distance nature of the learning process, feel isolated; the second reason may be that they bring their own understanding of learning from their informal systems into the formal learning environment; thirdly, they may be expressing a certain desire to belong to the education community. To most students, learning is a social process whereby a student feels the need to interact with fellow students and teachers. That is why the culture of independent learning as prescribed by the distance education institution was found problematic.

The majority of students came into higher education with expectations based on past schooling where learning was directed and controlled by a teacher. When they were thrown into a distance-learning environment, where they had to do most of their work alone, they felt left out, insecure and alienated. Distance education does not simply encourage student independence; it requires and assumes student autonomy. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that many distance education students in South Africa do not study through the medium of their first language. Although a majority of them choose to study in English as opposed to Afrikaans, they lack the necessary fluency in the chosen language to cope adequately with academic work. As a result, they need more support than they are presently getting. Unisa offers face-to-face tuition through tutorials which are held once a week in various centres in the cities. However, most students who live in rural areas cannot access the facilities and resources because of high transport costs.

Despite these problems, students reported that they took up further study for the purposes of personal development. Change and development of students "reflects a growth in awareness of the nature of knowledge and its construction" (Morgan & Beaty, 1997, p. 235). To understand the transformative process, Mezirow (2000) argues, it is important to look at the student (who is doing the learning) and their circumstances (the socio-cultural and institutional systems). "The justification of much of what we know and believe, our values and our feelings, depends on the context – biographical, historical, cultural – in which they are embedded" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 3).

Students identified learning not only with the desire to improve themselves as individuals, but also with the aspiration to improve the conditions of people in their communities. Most students associated learning with contributing to the community. The students

expressed aspirations to help improve the social conditions of people in their communities. Cliff (1998) also found that South African students perceived learning as “a moral obligation or service to the community” (p. 213). “Studying to help their own people reflects the moral dimension to learning” (Boulton-Lewis et al., 2000, p. 407). Some Nigerian students in Watkins and Akande’s (1994) study identified learning as a duty to help.

In talking about their responsibility to help the community, students felt that they had a responsibility to use the knowledge and skills acquired in education for the benefit of their community. To these students, learning is a means of giving back to the community. This is informed by an understanding that a person develops skills and other qualities with the aim of enhancing the life of the community as a whole. A Tshivenda (one of the South African languages) saying, *muthu o bebelwa munwe* – which, loosely translated, means “a person is already born for the other” – supports the view that a member of the community has a responsibility to recognise his or her obligation to serve the needs of others. Therefore, learning is something to be used for the benefit of others. This finding indicates an aspect of learning that is embedded in cultural beliefs and practices.

Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that learning means different things to different people in different cultural contexts and with different backgrounds. People acquire attitudes, values, beliefs and their ways of learning within their cultures. While most of the students’ conceptions of learning have been acquired at an individual level, they have been culturally and socially constructed, and this therefore contributes to a students’ mindset about education (Bempechat et al., 2000). To learn, according to Säljö (1987), “is to act within man-made institutions and to adapt to the particular definitions of learning that are valid in the educational environment in which one finds oneself” (p. 106).



About the Author

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Giorgi argued that the phenomenon of learning can only be understood if we investigate the lifeworld of the learner. The learners’ lifeworld provided a composite picture of the distance learners’ beliefs about their own learning, their past experiences, and how those experiences have impacted on their conception of learning. What students do when they learn, and how they understand learning, are important considerations if we want to improve teaching and learning. Conceptions of learning affect students’ approaches to learning, which in turn affect their learning outcomes.

To improve learning in order to achieve the reconstruction and development goals as outlined in South African higher education policy documents, teachers and administrators need to understand who their learners are, where they are coming from, what type of support is needed, and how best to assist in facilitating the learning process. A better understanding of what students do when they are actually learning in their personal context will assist distance education teachers to develop study material that will provide appropriate support for students to develop confidence in their learning.

These findings also resonate with the questions regarding the role of distance education institutions in facilitating access to higher education to students from rural environments. One of the key aims of widening participation in South African higher education is to increase human resources to develop rural areas. Through distance education, students who live in remote places can access higher education. This is “seen as important to rural development because it enables people to learn without moving from rural areas” (Badat, 2005, p. 30). To support distance learners effectively, especially those who live in rural areas, distance education teachers need to be aware of the variety of experiences that students bring into the learning environment. An understanding of students’ experiences and their conceptions of learning will go a long way towards improving practice in distance education.

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