

ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF HEALTH, SOCIAL CARE AND EDUCATION

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF
ADULT, ASYNCHRONOUS DISTANCE LEARNING

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for the degree of Doctor of Education (EdD)

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ABSTRACT

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This practitioner-led study explores the subjective experience of distance learning. The ability of this mode of education to offer deep learning opportunities is questioned in the academic literature; an impression compounded by the gap between contemporary notions of transformational learning and organisationally led appraisals of distance learning. Therefore, this research is distinct because investigative attention is placed on person-centred understandings of distance learning alumni. To address the research question, the qualitative methodology of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is used as approach, process and method. The small scale research design features individual, in-depth telephone interviews followed by a transcript verification meeting. In IPA, the power of the single and collective voice of participants is recognised through systematic description and interpretation. To aid reflexivity and rigour, a methodological extension entitled 'echoes' innovatively contributes to the six steps of IPA analysis.

Interpretative insights reveal the participants' transformational learning, visible through five pedagogical tenets associated with the notion of self-connected learning. Self-connected learning is an original contribution to educational knowledge, and encapsulates the embodied experience of learning for the self, nurtured in a caring environment to empower ongoing self-efficacy, curiosity and choice. Transformational change is observed when the participants turn their gaze inwards, embracing new ways of thinking and acting, with tutors providing stability whilst encouraging intellectual risk-taking. Importantly, the consequences of the learning experience are noted after course completion through real-life integration. Temporal outcomes show distance learning as conducive to significant and relevant learning when embedded in a learning atmosphere of care, consistency and supportive challenge.

The detailed application of IPA allows for transferability, whilst making no claims of generalisability. Instead, ideas are offered to encourage confidence and self-learning via pedagogic assumptions, distance learning curricula, and tutor actions. Recommendations are also suggested regarding future educational research and IPA practice. When distance learning is understood as an embodied experience, new conversations about the integration of humanistic educational ideals can go hand-in-hand with advancements in technology.

Key Words: Distance Learning, Transformational Learning Theory, Alumni,
Reflexivity, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Chapter 1: Introduction – The landscape of my practice

The Starting Point

This thesis details a phenomenological research study as part requirement for the Education Doctorate (EdD). The choice of research topic was motivated by my daily practice as a distance learning, undergraduate course leader, and the doctoral journey embarked on to improve my knowledge and skills; enabling more active contribution and interaction with my academic community (Smith *et al.*, 2011). To gain a new perspective, the stance of a practitioner-researcher led me to examine the hidden complexities of what I think I know. At the outset, I saw research and practice as separate and thought that I would scrutinise my working world, read the literature and then make changes, in a considered way, based on the outcomes. In reality, the boundaries between theory and practice blurred; any change in one provoked a new understanding of the other, resulting in a lived and truly iterative process. Consequently, the output from this study directly impacts on my professional practice and adds to shared knowledge (Anderson & Braud, 2011).

In line with Murray and Beglar's (2009) advice to support the reader, this introductory chapter outlines the overall thesis by;

- Setting out the academic landscape of this study
- Contextualising my interpretive phenomenological exploration of distance learning
- Orientating the reader to the structural nuances of this research report
- Offering a flavour of the theoretical underpinnings of this thesis.

The study is set in the context of my work with mature students studying on an online, part-time, undergraduate (top-up) degree course. As such, my educational practice does not take place in the traditional classroom. Instead, technology is used as the medium for educational delivery, communication, and assessment. Working days are frequently spent in dialogue with students I never physically meet, until graduation. Their hard work, frustrations, and triumphs, as they juggle home, work, and study, is revealed via media-assisted communications. Yet, these students' names and progress compose the discourse of my practice. However, when asked to reflect on my practice at the start of my doctoral journey, I reticently concluded that I actually knew little about the student perspective of the distance learning experience. Conceding that I had little idea of how the learners personally perceived the course or indeed whether the time, effort, and energy expended during their studies made any difference

outside the course, felt troublesome. So, rather than being drawn into the technical aspects of distance learning, I questioned the experience of learning itself, in relation to the long term function and the impact of the course I lead.

As I note in Chapter 2, tracing the theoretical background for my area of interest in the literature proved challenging. I struggled to identify specific information about the post-course impact of distance learning. Instead, the extant literature leans heavily toward institutionally-led methods of short term, in-course evaluation, mainly comprising of module/course surveys (Universities UK, 2013a; QAA, 2014; Anglia Ruskin University (ARU), 2015b). Following course completion, graduates from the course I lead, are again surveyed about their general higher education experience via the Student Academic Experience Survey (HEPI-HEA, 2015) and the Student Experience Survey (Grove, 2015). Therefore, evaluative interest from an institutional perspective prioritises in-course quality (Universities UK, 2015b; ARU, 2015b) via learner-reported, structured evaluation. Yet, on deeper scrutiny, the existing survey instruments in my course site students as external observers of outward facing issues such as; resources, facilities, and tutor performance.

There is apparently limited evaluative attention toward the personal (intrinsic) consequences of learning. Whilst learner-led appraisal does occur through a variety of means, both in- and post-course, graduates are not formally asked about their subjective meanings of the learning that has taken place. However, current methods of learner-led evaluation significantly influences university policy, procedures, and funding (Darwin, 2011). I argue that the present evaluative procedures provide me, as distance learning course lead, with only half the story. The 'human' subscript is missing, meaning that I am working on assumptions about the personal educational experience, as the questions have not been asked. Evidence is lacking as to the learners' own perceptions of their 'graduate-ness' as defined by the QAA (2014) in *Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies* (Appendix A). Describing the nature and characteristics of the learning outcomes for higher education awards, the descriptors show learning outcomes aiming for positive impact on everyday life. Amalgamating academic achievement with real life integration is aligned with the overarching premise of contemporary adult learning theory (Merriam & Bierema, 2014; King, 2017). Adult learning theories share an understanding that adults and children learn differently, hence tutors use insights into adult learning to be more effective in their educational practice and responsive to the learners they work with. However, how distance learning impacts on the individual experience of learning is unclear.

Crucially, in building my argument, I found consensus in the literature for the widespread adoption of distance learning in higher education (Bolinger & Inan, 2012; Universities UK, 2015a) necessitating scrutiny of quality, efficacy *and* impact. For Wilson and Parrish (2010) and Ossiannilsson and Landgren (2012) impact refers to both internal (meaning for the individual) and external (consequences outside the self). Furthermore, just as with institutional evaluation, existing research mainly considers distance learning, at the time of learning, in terms of its technicality, for example; content, structure, technological design, and efficiency (Salmon, 2004; Garrison, 2011; Major 2015). Mirroring my concern, the omission of the subjective experience is documented by Boyer, Maher and Kirkman (2006), Veletsianos (2010) and Wilson, Parrish and Dunlap (2011) who all advise research into the broader, more humanistic aspects of learning (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). In this case, research was necessary to move beyond preliminary appraisals and discover new understandings of the deeper levels of learning and impact. Hence, from engaging with the available literature, I concluded that research focus is needed to form a better sense of what the distance learning experience means for learners, in the context of their everyday lives.

Practice Position

To position my research in the scene of my practice necessitates description and this required consideration of how I understand my course leader role and, importantly, how my educational principles influence what I do. On a practical level, I work alongside my colleagues to develop, deliver and manage online learning modules. Yet, in the midst of a busy working environment, little room is found for deeper philosophical enquiry and discussion. Instead, attention is given to the smooth running of the virtual learning environment (VLE) and dealing with day-to-day student issues. Only when directly asked, did I turn my gaze to the underlying assumptions of my pedagogic stance. Here, my thinking became more perplexing, because the reasons for what I do are not simply tied to my given role, but are bundled up with my own experiences and views about myself and my world. Ironically, although my routine practice aims to enable people to question and support their practice, this has been a blind spot for me. Hence, my job role sets my practice position, but the intricacies of my assumptions have, perhaps more subtly than previously realised, influenced my reasoning and actions.

As a result, the process of this study guides the personal and professional reframing of my practice position through the integration of literature and evidence generated from the data. The toing and froing between what I thought I knew and new understandings secures a more informed view of how learning can happen, the influences on learning and the individualised

consequences of learning. In particular, ideas from Transformational Learning Theory (see below and in detail in Chapter 2) made a wider source of thinking available to me. As the research progressed, changes in my own pedagogic reasoning occurred as I refined, translated and linked the theory to my study. I initially began in the techno-centric practice world, removed from the learner by geographical distance, but as the thesis develops my practice position modifies and shifts closer to a learner-focussed, curiosity-centric frame of understanding.

Theoretical Position

In order to explore the experience of distance learning, I considered which approach to understanding learning would be most beneficial for my research purpose. Specific distance learning pedagogies are available, such as Connectivism (Downes, 2012; AlDahdouh, Osório, & Caires, 2015) but this responds to the technologically led influences of learning, whereas, my interest centres on individual impact. Transformational Learning Theory (TLT) (Mezirow, 2000; Taylor & Cranton, 2013) stood out as it is viewed as a contemporary conceptualisation for adult education and research relating to this theory is trickling steadily into the field of distance learning (Boyer, Maher & Kirkman, 2006; Hoskins, 2013, Dhilla, 2016). TLT considers the individualised, humanistic consequences resulting from learning. Contrasting with the model of andragogy and adult learner characteristics (Linderman, 1961; Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2005), TLT emphasises how experiences, fostered by human-human interactions create opportunities for change, as explained by Mezirow,

learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action. (1996, p. 162)

Following modifications to Mezirow's (1997) concept of a single point of transformation, transformational effects are now believed to slowly ripen (Taylor & Snyder, 2012) where personalised meanings are thought to continually refine, clarify, and progress, which are difficult to articulate in the short term. Therefore, transformational development is an outcome of deep-level learning, because as Mezirow describes, 'it is irreversible once completed; that is, once our understandings [have] clarified and we have committed ourselves fully to taking the action it suggests' (1991, p. 152). Deep-level learning is the ability to conceptualise and create significant meaning, leading to personal change (Marton & Säljö, 1976), where previous understanding opens opportunities for an integrated and discerning world view because Mezirow's theory presumes meaning perspectives (or assumptions) filter experience. When a

radically dissimilar or incongruent experience collides with our assumptions, the encounter may be discarded or allowed to spark transformational ideas.

In the context of my educational practice, a striking resemblance is seen between Mezirow's ambition for adult learning; 'to help the individual become a more autonomous thinker by learning to negotiate his or her own values, meanings and, purpose rather than uncritically acting on those of others' (1997, p. 11) and the qualities of degree level scholarship (QAA, 2014). Consequently, the apparent disparity between gathering short term information about course experience and the TLT creates a dilemma about the individualised impact of distance learning, which is not resolved in the literature. The tension between the theory and practice fits with Garrison and Archer's proposition that in order to realise meaningfully the potential of technical progression in distance learning, innovative directions for pedagogic investigation are essential to 'explain, interpret, and shape the new forms of educational practice that have been made possible by highly interactive communications technologies' (2007, p. 77). Thus, in agreement, Cleveland-Innes and Campbell (2012) contend that technological factors alone do not explain the success of distance learning, therefore, my study centres on the lived experience and human consequences of distance learning.

Research Context

Distance learning is synonymous with alternatives to classroom-based modes of delivery to opening educational access (Eby, 2015). Spanning more than two hundred years (Spector *et al.*, 2008), substantial advances are apparent in how educational resources are devised, communicated, used, and understood. For example, the Open University (OU) revolutionised distance learning in 1969 by creating viable, accommodating and accessible education. Since then, national and international universities have followed suit, offering distance learning in a mounting portfolio of educational opportunities (Zawacki-Richter & Anderson, 2014). To support this trend, Major (2015) explains how technological developments such as the upgrading of the Internet, combined with innovations in virtual learning environments (VLE) and communication methods have made an abundance of online tools available for the construction and assessment of distance learning.

In the VLE, tangible boundaries blur in the two broadly synchronous and asynchronous delivery patterns (Yuzer & Eby, 2014). Synchronous learning involves tutors and students working simultaneously, resembling traditional teaching methods, despite being remotely located. Alternatively, as is the case for the course that I lead, asynchronous learning allows

tutors and students flexibility. Learning is fitted to existing schedules, with no requirement for simultaneous participation with tutors or peers. Though the technological field is widening, my research is firmly grounded in the work I do. In essence, by stripping back the technological frontage, I am putting the distance-learning course I lead under the microscope to examine what is not overtly seen by the naked eye of my routine practice. Consequently, I concentrate on discovering detail rather than deal with a broad picture of distance learning.

Methodological Position

In this study, data was sought through the experiential accounts from the alumni of a single distance-learning course, corresponding to an inductive approach to qualitative research (Arthur *et al.*, 2012). Qualitative research attempts to progress explanations of social phenomena by uncovering the underlying reasons, attitudes, and motivations of people in a particular context. With an emphasis on experiential understandings, phenomenology stood out as the most appropriate methodology for this thesis. Finlay and Ballinger (2006) describe phenomenology as a substantial philosophical tradition, as well as a leading methodology in the field of human sciences. Stemming from the Greek term for 'bring into the light', Smith (2016) emphasises that phenomenology activates a move beyond initial and obvious appearances. Researchers enquire about the nature and meanings of phenomena to find out how things appear to individuals via their perceived experiences (Finlay, 2008); because as McNamara identifies, our natural attitude 'conceals the extraordinary in the ordinary; the strange in the commonplace; the hidden in the obvious' (2005, p. 697). Thus, phenomenology is the wide-ranging examination of how human experience is shaped by structures, ranging from cognition and perception, to self-consciousness, physical attentiveness, and affective (emotional) responses (Smith, 2016). The external event itself is of less importance to phenomenological enquiry, as it exists outside of the person's physical being.

The discussion in Chapter 3 defends my selection of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) to capture, interpret, and gain a temporal insight, interpretatively distilled from the participants' lived experiences. The overarching focus of IPA is to describe what something is like, in a specific context (Smith, 2004; Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2008). Using three key arenas of philosophical thought, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography, IPA is regarded as an approach, a process, and a method (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). The methodology is justified for this research because;

- i) The approach is advantageous for novel questions, unclear issues and where researchers seek to understand change
- ii) The analytic process has defined layers, aiding transparency in interpretation
- iii) Small samples are used to deeply explore specific phenomenon.

Text and Terminology

Roberts (2010) discusses the importance of clarity and explanation early in a thesis about terminology used, grammatical issues, texts and abbreviations. To identify myself as the author, highlight authenticity and promote transparency, I have deliberately written in the first person. The nature of an IPA study, demands that researchers centrally situate themselves in order to encourage new, imaginative understandings (Smythe *et al.*, 2008) derived from the participant voice, so verbatim quotes are italicised. The change in font delineates my words from the participants' accounts and the inclusion of an ellipsis (i.e. ...) shows that part of the text is intentionally omitted. I have also applied the research terminology (e.g. sample, data) indicated by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009). To preserve confidentiality, the level 6 course completed by the participants is referred to as 'the BSc'. In addition, I use and cite the most recent English translations of the original, classical phenomenological treatises at the time of writing (see reference list).

A straightforward definition of distance learning is used throughout this thesis; tutors and students interacting via technology-assisted communication (Casey, 2008) in a situation where the 'benefits of adult learning are tangible outcomes or perceived personal advantages resulting from participation in adult learning activities' (Kuan & Larsson, 2008, p. 59).

Guide to the Chapters

The thesis has nine chapters, but in essence the story is one of an integrated research process, combining my practice with the available literature, the research undertaken, and my ideas for future work. In Chapter 2, my literature review travels around and narrows the existing field of enquiry, assigning the uncharted area for specific analysis. Methodological direction is given in Chapter 3, where the major philosophical influences of IPA are reviewed, along with my decision-making rationale. The fourth chapter identifies the research design, and is followed by Chapter 5 demonstrating the IPA process of six-step analysis.

In Chapter 6, I separate what belongs to the participants and what part of the experience is mine. The content clarifies the insertion of Sub-Step 3b in the previous chapter, showing how I have lived the theory of reflexivity in my commitment to rigour. Deeper, phenomenological insights, illuminated through the philosophical foundations of IPA are identified and justified in Chapter 7, where five themes are translated into pedagogical tenets, placing the participants' experience in a setting of transformational change. Discussion in Chapter 8 brings together the unique insights from this research.

Finally, Chapter 9 provides a place to look back before moving forward again. A pedagogic position, presenting the embodied, self-connected experience of distance learning and the tutor role is presented in relation to my contribution to educational knowledge. The potential impact of my work and the research limitations are then established. Future research is suggested, including re-visioning research attention toward the alumni and a review of the terminology of distance learning is indicated. This concluding chapter argues for the beneficial influence of research on practice, as well as for researchers themselves.

Research Question

How do distance learning graduates describe their learning experience?

The research question initiated and addressed in this thesis emerged through the combined realisation that i) immediate and organisationally focused appraisals of distance learning are seemingly at odds with contemporary notions of transformational learning, and ii) a shift in research ideation is needed to steer technologically based enquiry toward more person-centred understandings of distance learning.

The research question is constructed to maintain methodological congruence by requiring a description that can be interpreted, then compared and contrasted to generate new understandings. The phrasing of the question, in specifying graduates indicates this to be a retrospective investigation of people who have completed a distance-learning course and implies an openness to the individual perceptions and understandings of what the experience means for them.

Statement of Likely Original Contribution to Knowledge

My research extends the parameters of the research field using the experiences of a group of distance learning alumni and is unique for five main reasons;

- i) In its exploration of how students experience distance learning
- ii) In its attention to the alumni, where importance is not recognised in the literature, especially in relation to personal and professional learning
- iii) Gains insight into the lived experience of distance learning, rather than a technical focus
- iv) Raises pedagogic awareness of the connection between learning and the self
- v) Applies IPA and in particular develops Sub-Step 3b to demonstrate reflexivity

This research, primarily directed toward ‘the self’ in distance learning, adds a further dimension to technologically-assisted pedagogical research. The anticipated outcome offers a contemporary view of the distance learning experience in a rapidly expanding area of educational practice.

Chapter Summary

The starting point for reciprocity between theory and practice is established and sets the scene for this thesis, where I am a practitioner-researcher aiming to understand phenomenologically more about the lived experience of distance learning and transfer my findings back to practice. In shifting the research focus to person-centred understandings of a small group of distance learning alumni, the lens of IPA can be used to view the transformational components of learning during, and importantly beyond, course completion. As the thesis progresses, the significance of my work is demonstrated, as is the need to continue to extend the pedagogic conversation around distance learning. The following chapter presents the theoretical background of my study, with the purpose of appraising the field of enquiry. The discussion will move away from the body of distance- learning evidence which supports directing learners to content and contact with peers and find an alternative perspective to survey the scene. The outcome of my exploration of the literature reveals an apparent gap in knowledge for my novel research to redirect learning back to ‘the self’.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Background – Appraising the field of enquiry

Parameters for the Literature Review

My professional doctoral enquiry centres on understanding more about the intrinsic issues of learning and what this means for distance learners. Therefore, the narrative tone of this review intentionally emphasizes the ongoing exchange between my practice and the evidence base (Ridley, 2012). To refine the breadth and depth of my reading about adult-focused learning and the implications for online pedagogy, the route chosen for this chapter is deliberately narrow and specific. In taking a humanistic stance to the experience of learning and learner-led consequences of asynchronous, adult distance learning, I am not explicitly deliberating online design, process, or technology. As a result, I have not ventured into the historical developments and the controversies surrounding the terminology of distance learning. I also have set aside the areas of blended learning (Garrison & Vaughn, 2011), mobile learning (Crompton 2013) and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) (Kim, 2014), as these do not feature in my routine work. Instead, key word markers in this study are; distance, adult, learning, experience and impact.

An initial, wide-ranging scoping exercise employed the foremost bibliographic search engines dedicated to the area of higher education, for instance; Educational Resources Information Centre (ERIC); British Education Index, Education Data Base and, Professional Development Collection, as well as the university digital library. In addition, ensuring the originality of my work, I regularly checked my work using Turnitin alongside searches for dissertations and theses on EThOS, ProQuest, DART-Europe and Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (NDLTD). As I became more familiar with the extant literature, I expanded the generic key words to include synonyms and phrase combinations, including; online, e-learning, higher education, post-course, effect, influence, outcome, alumni, and graduates. I also applied the three Boolean operators AND, OR and NOT to link and demarcate associations in and between the search terms, to restrict or broaden the record sets as appropriate. Predetermined limiters did not change in relation to age (adult), educational context (online distance learning), and research focus (student expressed learning experience).

At this stage, my direction of intellectual travel was away from solely evaluating empirical evidence, or presenting a broad spectrum account: an outcomes-orientated or methodological review is not possible, as the evidence of longitudinal distance learning impact is scarce. In its place, trends in authorship, citation, and themes generating from contemporary adult learning

led to a more purposeful approach to selection. Furthermore, the theoretical evidence prompted consideration in terms of utility for myself and my practice. Indeed, I found it impossible to not use ideas just formulated. Taking this view forward, the pedagogic notion of Transformational Learning Theory stood out as significant for my area of interest, therefore I added the term 'transformation' and associated synonyms to the list of key words. Hence, searching, finding, and reasoning became an evolutionary mapping process, rather than a singular activity driven purely by procedure. Mezirow's claim that 'learning is irreversible once completed' (1991, p.152) was becoming apparent in the integration my daily educational and research practice. So, as the evidence grew, I let the literature lead me, tracking particular pieces of evidence. My intellectual journey carried me toward the research gap because I repeatedly looked for evidence that I could not find. Of the numerous models and theories of adult education and online pedagogy available, those selected for inclusion were chosen because of their prominence and distinctiveness for this study. Using seminal and salient resources to build a discrete and functional theoretical background, this critical discussion provided the pedagogical fabric for my experiential study.

Rationale for Theoretical Concepts Used

As indicated in Chapter 1, my aim was to uncover the humanistic properties of the learning experience. In the current understanding of intrinsic learning in the higher educational context, learning is commonly considered as a dynamic process, offering individuals the opportunity to know more about themselves in relation to the world around them (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010). With regard to distance learning, Garrison (2011) claims that, 'e-learning has the benefits of personal freedom and connectivity' (2011, p. 3). The notion of promoting meaningful, creative and useful pedagogy is evident in the early writings of the progressive educationalist, philosopher, psychologist and political activist, John Dewey, who wrote about 'active, expressive' learning (1915, p.20). The humanistic function of education for Dewey is to enable people to fulfil their own potential and inspire others to do the same (Muraro, 2016). Thus, the thought-provoking facets of Dewey's interest in educational interactions, the learning environment, thinking and reflection, and his passion for democracy are important contributions for exploring the experience and impact of learning.

Whilst often misaligned with childhood education, Dewey's work is not confined to any particular curriculum tradition and can be regarded as influential for distance education. Indeed Hickman (2001, p.25) describes Dewey as 'a philosopher of technology'. Whilst 'pre-digital', Dewey's view that the human in-potential of abstract thinking and culturally contextualised practices

are needed to develop and make technology work is of relevance to modern technologically assisted educational practice. However, Northcote and Gosselin (2016) argue that despite the popularity of distance learning, there is a worrying blind spot growing as to the personal and human-orientation of these courses, warranting further examination and study. Reasons such as limited resource management, generic course design and pedagogic misunderstanding can overshadow or minimise the individualised nature of the learning experience. Whereas, a humanistic approach accentuates the subjectivity of the learning experience by viewing choice, creativity, dignity, and self-worth as crucial elements for personal growth. Such features are fundamental to the founding architect of 'student-centred learning', Carl Rogers. Rogers' ideas are important for this thesis because his theory of education emerged from his observations about personal development, which digressed from the then prevailing wisdom of psychoanalysis and behavioural therapy. The term student-centred learning derives from 'person-centred' to distinguish it from his treatment model (Rogers, 1951).

Assembled from the work of Maslow, Rogers' (1959) pioneering approach asserted that an environment where genuineness, acceptance, and empathy fosters personal growth, both in terms of therapy and learning. Similarly to Dewey, Rogers' identifies learning as beneficial for the individual and consequently, for their interactions with other people and the world they live in. Translating into his theory of learning, Rogers' ascribes to an atmosphere where learners are comfortably exposed to new ways of thinking and threatening, external factors are minimised. The environment enhances a natural eagerness to learn, yet he also acknowledges the struggle of giving up on long held assumptions. However, Rogers emphasises that individuals must learn for themselves, faculty cannot impose a student-centred approach – only help learners to engage with it.

Student-centred practice is not simply a matter of using an alternative teaching technique. Rather a fundamental acceptance and commitment of academic staff to attend to each learner, regardless of delivery mode (Blackie, Case & Jawitz, 2010). Extending this view, Schuller and Watson (2009) and Haythornthwaite and Andrews (2011) recognise distance learning as a dynamic and influential mode in personal development and lifelong learning. Conversely, this seemingly straightforward route becomes harder to follow as Ossiannilsson and Landgren (2012) question the rhetoric for distance learners because attention is placed on immediate participation and not future applicability. An underlying cause of this theoretical confusion stems from the dichotomy in the lifelong learning literature between humanitarian ideals and overt, tangible outcomes, which Gilroy (2013) terms as 'business, innovation and skills'. The former is less easy to measure than the latter, but neither are comprehensively determinable in the short-term.

Therefore, the landscape surrounding the longitudinal impact of distance learning presents a quandary, on the one hand it is conceived to be a worthy constituent of lifelong learning, but on the other the evidence base is sparse about longer-term, personalised effects. This is not a novel dilemma in adult education (Kegan, 1994; Brennan *et al.*, 2010), but the technologically mediated context adds a new dimension (Anderson, 2010; Canning & Callan, 2010). Theory supports the idea that students' interest in the learning experience should not end when their studies end (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004; Proulx, 2006; Baxter Magolda, 2010; Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2012), but face-to-face modes of delivery presently inform this conclusion. If the premise their learning facilitates change is accepted, then the challenge is to know what has happened and how far-reaching the impact for distance, as well as classroom-based, learners.

When attempting to determine personalised post-course impact, the predicament of finding an effective pedagogic approach for learning at a distance comes into view. To be useful post-course, the in-course experience needs to help learners to be dynamic contributors to their own knowledge (Angelino, Williams & Natvig, 2007) as opposed to anonymous recipients of information (Adams, 2014). From a humanistic perspective, the generic student concealed behind the computer screen must be restored into a person who has a past, present, and future. Indeed ideas taken from humanism are evident in the online learning theory of heutagogy (Hase & Kenyon 2000, Albon 2006, Blaschke 2012) which is based on self-determined identification, construction and appraisal of learning. Therefore, the principles of humanism and heutagogy unite in challenging ideas about teaching and learning by arguing for the learner to be at the centre of their own (distance) education.

Heutagogy moves away from the traditional conventions of educational practice. As with Rogers (1996), heutagogy is less interested with precisely what is learnt and is more concerned with how the learning has occurred. Hase and Kenyon (2000) believe that the educational emphasis must be placed on process not outcome. In this way, there is no presupposition of the need for a teacher, given Rogers' (1969) dictum that adults cannot be taught, but only facilitated. Such facilitation is viewed as enabling the relearning how to learn, countering the restrictions imposed in formal education to manage learning (Blaschke & Hase, 2015). The up-to-the-minute, digital context of readily available information permits the individualised experience of learning in a diverse technological milieu (Hase, 2013), altering the function of the tutorial role.

Critically, the mandate of heutagogy sits outside theories of social learning in prioritising the learner as, 'the major agent in their own learning, which occurs as a result of personal

experiences (Hase & Kenyon 2007, p. 112). At the other end of the spectrum, Wenger and Snyder (2000) advocate that the social learning theory recognises people as subjects of learning and their participation with other learners results in the development of thinking and behaviour. However, the bottom line for both of these opposing perspectives is that learning is important for the individual. Repositioning attention back to the distance learner and their learning provides a view point from which to understand more about how learning happens, what learning means for the individual and the ways in which learning is used. In the literature, such issues align with conceptualisations of transformation (Merriam, 2014; Blaschke & Hase, 2015). Superseding andragogy (Brookfield, 1986; Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2011), Taylor (2009) posits Transformational Learning Theory (TLT) as a major philosophy in adult education and Calleja (2014) argues that over the past thirty years, the theory has reconceptualised adult learning. Therefore, instead of extensively describing the origins of TLT, the following discussion will set up a specific research focus, confirm the potential contribution of my enquiry and place my study with the existing body of work.

Working with Ideas Associated with Transformational Learning Theory in the Context of Distance Learning

Concentrated on the influence of experience for cognitive, affective, and behavioural change, TLT (Mezirow, 2000, Maiese, 2017) is pedagogically pivotal to my interest in the process and impact of distance learning. Informed by Freire's concept of *conscientization*, Kuhn's notions of *paradigm shifts*, ideas stemming from the women's movement, and the critical theory of Habermas, transformation theory emerged and was extended through grounded theory research undertaken by Mezirow and Marsick (Mezirow, 1978; Mezirow & Marsick, 1978). The theory embraces the intrinsic benefits to the person with positive, extrinsic consequences for others, and is therefore consistent with policy and practice in higher education (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010; DoE, 2011; QAA, 2012). Developed and popularised by Mezirow (1978, 2000, 2003), this primarily constructivist theory (Merriam, 2011) questions 'taken for granted' thinking (habits of mind) to gain a better understanding and influence actions. Therefore, like constructivism and the preceding work of Dewey, TLT relates to education and epistemology by providing an account of how learning occurs and the nature of knowledge. Echoing Rogers (1959) and heutagogic assumptions (Hase & Kenyon, 2000), TLT positions people as active knowledge constructors developing individualised meaning from their experiences. Learners are encouraged to think about their own learning as opposed to restricting emphasis to the subject or delivery mode.

The complex and dynamic nature of adult learning is reiterated by Cranton (2006), and later in Kasl and York's (2012) observation that since inception, TLT is a theory in progress. For example, Taylor (2007) suggests that transformation is no longer situated in a single, context-bound event, but is multi-factorial, only becoming apparent via retrospective appraisal of the transformative experience. Although the main principles of the theory remain (Mezirow & Associates, 2010, Taylor & Cranton, 2012), application has widened to include media-assisted learning. Henderson (2010) concluded that to keep pace with the increasing interest in transformative learning in the online setting, greater research attention was needed. Hence, numerous books, established publications (e.g. *Journal of Transformative Education*, *Journal of Transformative Learning*) and international conferences, scrutinise transformative learning as part of the growing technology-assisted milieu, coinciding with Garrison's (2011) contention that, 'we need to stop being seduced by technology and trivial applications masquerading as an educational experience' (2011, p. 123). Similarly, King's (2011) belief that transformative learning should encompass deeper views of learning cannot purely rely on quantitative outcomes, but needs the subjective value of education to be illuminated and celebrated.

However, from a critical perspective, the past two decades have seen limited assessment of the principal assumptions and practices of TLT in the research literature. Brookfield (2000) doubted the legitimacy of transformative learning, claiming the terminology as meaningless because of widespread, inappropriate use in the literature and classroom discourse. Later, Taylor and Snyder (2012) continue to observe research in this field as repetitive and void of critical sensitivity. Newman (2012) goes on to further debate whether TLT has become an accepted orthodoxy, ceasing the need for conceptual justification. Such concern is reinforced through Taylor and Cranton's (2013) review of 119 articles published between 2007 and 2012, and in excess of 1,300 using the theory in the text; few presented a critical stance; exceptions are evidenced in the work of van Woerkom, (2008) and Newman (2012).

Nevertheless, TLT continues to be evident in theory, practice and research, particularly by means of reflection. From a humanistic stance, reflection transforms inter- and intra-personal consciousness, progressing learning from superficial to deep-level, bespoke learning (Rogers, 1967; Rogers & Freiberg, 1994; Wang & King, 2008; Dieter, 2011). Indeed, Palloff and Pratt (2007) suggest, 'the online classroom is fertile territory for transformative learning' (2007, p. 187) denoting two categories of reflection i) content, and ii) perceived learning (self-awareness). The former is observable through behaviours and formal course achievement, while the latter occurs post course, and is more introspective and individualised. The assumption here is that online learning makes a difference, hence Mezirow (2003) reasons

that all learning is change. The relevant point is that change does not necessarily lead to transformation, the challenge is to know the difference.

Examination of the transformational aspects of student-student learning and instructional design is evident in the field of distance learning. Boyer, Maher and Kirkman's (2006) phenomenological study of graduate students found the phases of transformative learning repetitively apparent in online discussions, while Mori's (2007) mixed methods study concluded adult learners mostly identified intrapersonal issues of personal growth and self-esteem. Critically, despite seemingly positive results, there is a theoretical mismatch as research is occurring when students are participating in courses, and little is known about what happens when courses end. Mori noted how; 'Longitudinal studies are needed to develop an understanding of whether 'how one knows' has been altered' (2007, p. 357). Working along these pedagogic lines, exploration of TLT in the digital age reveals a deep conceptual fog obscuring the research field. Definitional clarity is then needed for what is actually being evaluated; the learning activity, experience, or impact.

Confusion over the precise nature of learning evaluation reflects Simpson's (2012) reservations about research reporting in-course transformative learning. He recommends closer attention to connect the data to the TLT, as findings are at risk of being more consistent with immediate reforming, rather than transforming outcomes, because there is no evidence of how the learning has been integrated post-course. Thus, my understanding for a contemporary investigation focusing on the transformational dimension of distance learning is justified, as long as I address the need to examine how transformation emerges. If observed too early, transformation may not have matured, or only be partially visible, showing reformation of original ideas, rather than the adoption of new ways of thinking and doing. Therefore, Taylor and Cranton (2013) encourages research to focus on,

- i) Experience, regarded as underpinning transformative learning, as meaning is seldom scrutinised
- ii) Empathy, appearing as a vital constituent in nurturing transformative learning
- iii) Desire to change, denoting progress from thinking to observable change.

Baxter Magolda and King (2004) make a comparison of the transformative type of effects noted above by Taylor and Cranton (2013) through descriptions of how learning can lead to lasting empowerment, confidence and autonomy. Baxter Magolda and King (2004) build on Kegan's (1994) work by affirming self-authorship as a positive function for adults in the complex, modern world. Their findings result from an inductively orientated, longitudinal study

which commenced in 1986 with 101 full-time, US campus-based undergraduates; 30 remain in the study with over 1,000 interviews now completed (Baxter Magolda, 2014). Data gathered annually, via conversational narrative interviews, attends to three key domains; epistemological, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. The participants' stories offer insights to achieving autonomy as confidence grows in the 'inner voice' (Perez *et al.*, 2015). The nature of self-authorship highlights how retrospective appraisal of a learning experience can illuminate concealed areas of the individualised process which are not apparent at the time of course-based evaluation.

The idea of self-authorship in developing autonomy is consistent with Mezirow's view that, 'we learn to negotiate and act on our own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others' (2000, p. 8). Shifting reliance from uncritical assimilation of others' ideas to self-meaning making, is considerably challenging for the learner. Progression depends on advancement from external foundations of taken-for-granted knowledge to an internal grounding of self-authorship and self-reliance. Like Mezirow (2003), Baillie, Meyer and Bowden point out that a change in ideas does not automatically lead to a change in action, stating,

Theories are just ideas after all. But if an idea is a threshold concept, it can give us the possibility of a future. If it becomes a capability, that future becomes more reachable. (2013, p. 228)

The prospect of exploring the application of TLT opens the way to my enquiry, in the form of threshold concepts or learning thresholds (Zepke, 2013; Land, 2014). Threshold concepts identify essential features of learning content and differ from core concepts as explained by Meyer and Land (2005), 'A core concept is a conceptual 'building block' that progresses the understanding of the subject, it has to be understood, but it does not necessarily lead to a qualitative different view of the subject matter' (2005, p. 4). Furthermore, Zepke (2013), describes a threshold concept as being discipline-specific and a gateway to autonomy. Thus, concentrating on the achievement of a specific subject-related understanding has the potential to transform learner perceptions of a subject in relation to their self-development. Continuing with this proposition, transformative learning is more than accessing new knowledge as it directly relates to personal transformation because a person's perspective, explanations, and reactions, and significantly, the way they feel about themselves and their surroundings are fundamentally altered (O'Sullivan, Morrell & O'Connor, 2002; Maiese, 2017).

However, transformation is not straightforward, easy or linear as it is associated with the construct of liminality which is pivotal to the acquisition of threshold concepts. Liminality is

noted by Meyer and Land (2005) as a mercurial form of understanding and markedly challenging for a person. It is a state of uncertainty, 'in which the learner may oscillate between old and emergent understandings' (Cousin 2006a, p. 4). Learners reposition themselves in this transient space as they try to cross the threshold concept (Baillie *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, liminality can be recognised as a transformative state because alterations are occurring to the individuals meaning frame (Schwartzman 2010) combined with changes in their subjective understandings (Meyer & Land 2005). As such, threshold concepts possess common transformative features, in particular the sense of 'troublesome knowledge', and that, once learnt, they are irreversible and transferable (Meyer, Land & Davies, 2006).

The subjective tolerance and willingness of learners to reside in a liminal space, whilst seeking new understanding is gaining research interest (Rattray, 2014). In the research picture, not every learner experiences transformation, raising questions as to why this might be (Land, Rattray & Vivian, 2014). Meyer, Land and Baillie (2010) argue threshold concepts need more than cognitive amendments to make deeper ontological shifting possible to secure transformation. Additionally, Davies contends, 'The power and value of the threshold concept can only be recognised by a student if they can see how it is able to act in an integrative way' (2003, p. 6). Maiese (2017) argues that transformation occurs when cognitive and affective elements are present, the learner experiences changes to how they think, feel, and behave; all being essential. As Cranton and Kasl caution, 'for too long researchers and scholars point toward changing behaviour as evidence for transformation' (2012, p. 395).

The complex nature of transformative learning reinforces the challenge of knowing if, how and when learners describe the process of transformation for themselves. Hicks, Berger and Generett (2005) conclusion that transformative experiences are not time-bound or discrete bundles of defined, observable learning is taken forward by Ross (2011) who confirms transformation as a gradual process, conceptualised in terms of 'shifting subjectivity', as opposed to immediate and fundamental alterations to selfhood. From a lifelong learning perspective, subjectivity, 'is therefore always shifting and uncertain and has to be continually "re-formed"' (Usher, Bryant & Johnson, 2002, p. 88). In this respect, subjectivity, or the way an individual experiences his/her world, is in constant development, and modifications in cognitive and/or affective experience are commonplace. So much so, that change is taken-for-granted, obscuring the experience of change because of unquestioning, personal acceptance. As Dewey noted, 'The path of least resistance and least trouble is a mental rut already made. It requires troublesome work to undertake the alteration of old beliefs' (1933, p. 136). From a research perspective, questions unpacking the obvious or accepted need to be asked, in order to ascertain the individual level and unique meanings of change, if indeed

change is recognised or has happened at all. Therefore, my belief is that snapshot module evaluations and quantitatively-orientated student experience surveys do not capture or help tell the transformative story of a learning experience, indicating that a different approach to understanding the impact of learning is necessary.

Expanding my exploration, I realised that I am not alone in questioning self-based learning. New perspectives of learning measurement and personal understanding are gathering momentum, particularly in distance learning (Hase & Kenyon, 2007; Cercone, 2008; Wilson & Parrish, 2010; Garrison, 2011; Baxter Magolda & King, 2012; Blaschke, 2012; Dawson, Gasevic & Mirriahi, 2016). Wang and King (2008) contend that meaningful appraisal of learning uses a wider, utilitarian lens, which feeds into concerns about how critical awareness is attained and measured in higher education. Understanding the learning impact is important, especially in light of the reservations from faculty staff about higher education having less personal and social impact than assumed (Fox & MacKeogh, 2003; Edmonds & Richardson, 2009; Arum & Roska, 2011). Indeed, alongside concerns about the efficacy of distance teaching (Hanson, 2009; Ossiannilsson & Landgren, 2012), Arum and Roska identified how, 'Students might graduate, but they are failing to develop higher-order cognitive skills that it is widely assumed college students should master' (2011, p. 121).

Using the Evidence-base to Identify the Gap

Distance learning is firmly established in the scenery of higher education, yet this mode of educational delivery is under constant scrutiny, with extensive attempts in the literature to assess practical application, overall results, learner satisfaction and faculty engagement (Irani *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, Coleman (2014) argues that distance learning struggles to hold the same credibility as traditional face-to-face modes, both by students and faculty. Indeed, evidence suggests distance learners experience weaker university attachment (Bollinger & Inan, 2012) than their traditional, face-to-face peers. Yet, despite the multitude of concerns, online provision remains an important and tenable consideration for the higher education sector in terms of recruitment, quality and output (Zawacki-Richter & Anderson, 2014). Therefore, from my understanding of the available evidence, I propose the need to shore up the pedagogical footings of distance learning.

Online educationalists need more awareness of the individualised consequence of current educational practices. Arguably, Anderson and Simpson (2012) have already identified the core components of distance learning as the amalgamation of people, technology, and the

institution. Whilst in agreement with the importance of blending and balancing these elements, I further advocate for the individual learning experience to be at the forefront of the pedagogical vision for technologically mediated course delivery. Laurillard supports my reasoning by eloquently voicing the dilemma as,

The problem is that transformation is more about the human and organizational aspects of teaching and learning than the technology. We have the ambition. We have the technology. What is missing is what connects the two. (2013, p. 16)

The ongoing debate as to whether technology can support and augment learning, indicates careful pedagogical consideration to determine the capacity of distance learning to promote, 'the expansion of consciousness through the transformation of basic worldview and specific capacities of the self' (Elias, 1997, p. 3). In the meantime, the theory base surrounding contemporary views of adult learning does not fit with immediate appraisals of attainment because of the time factor needed to amalgamate knowledge, experience, and reflect. The mismatch of theory and practice has resulted in confusion over the long-term consequence of distance learning. I propose that a different understanding of impact is required for this increasingly used mode of delivery, taking into account time, experience, and real-life integration. Questioning individualised consequence post-course is consistent with Moore and Kersey's (1996) assertion that, 'the more one understands the nature of adult learning, the better one can understand the nature of distance learning' (1996, p. 153).

Chapter Summary

From reviewing the literature, I found the concept of immediacy of learning impact to be at odds with conceptualisations of TLT, where value is placed on personal significance and growth in the longer-term for the self and others. Saunders, Bamber and Trowler (2011), Prosser (2011), Borkowsky (2013), and Taylor and Cranton (2013) all maintain that evaluation of learning should be based on wider interpretations of the student experience. Arguably then, re-conceptualising the evaluation of the personal impact of distance learning is not only necessary, but long overdue. Furthermore, from a transformational perspective, learner-centred higher education is not merely a different style of teaching; the academic is required to understand authentically the need for learner-centred attention. In this way, online practice necessitates a new stance to identify and conceptualise the individual distance learning experience rather than pursuing the trend in the technological aspects of this mode of delivery.

To take research action responds to Wilson and Parrish's (2010) call to 'raise the bar' in terms of investigating and understanding the potential of learning opportunities to have substantial, lasting impact. Meanwhile, the limited literature and evidence attributed to the long-term usefulness of this educational mode for part-time undergraduates is a warning sign of a practice environment rapidly taking technologically inspired routes without necessarily looking to the pedagogic theory. Therefore, I argue that the search for efficiency can lead to the immediacy of outcome taking precedence over personalised conceptions of efficacy. Meaning practice developments are conceivably based on preoccupations with technical functionality, without being securely grounded in personal functionality. In recognising this tension, my study attends to the complexities of the experience, from a graduate perspective by taking a qualitative view of distance learning.

Ascertaining the focus of my research has enabled me to fully appreciate Boote and Beile's (2005) assertion that, 'a researcher cannot perform significant research without first understanding the literature in the field' (2005, p. 3). This is because the theory environment is diverse, disparate and different from what I had assumed. I had not appreciated that the subjective experience and long-term impact of distance learning had been given such limited research attention. Much of my time was spent searching for evidence that did not exist, and a pragmatic approach arose to uncover thinking and research that could influence and support further enquiry. I adjusted my outlook to meet Wilson and Parrish's (2010) observation that,

We need to check the impulse to model-build and theorize, in deference to learning from cases and reports of transformative learning experiences happening in the world. (2010, p. 7)

I now see that as well as being able to navigate my way around the existing literature, my own paths must be made. My treatment of the topic of distance learning differs from more technologically-focused investigations. In taking this stance, I am open to Cranton's (2006) proposition that educators must become critical pedagogists, questioning themselves and their routine practice and connect to ideas put forward by Anderson and Braud (2011) that research is a process for transforming self and others. In practice, I was already noticing changes in my thinking and pedagogic actions. Following on, the next chapter builds on my understanding of the extant literature to identify a coherent, methodological route into my field of enquiry.

Chapter 3: Methodology: Determining the route into my field of enquiry

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experience and human consequence of distance learning. So far, the preceding chapters provide the practice-based context and the theoretical background. This chapter moves the research process on by presenting my methodological justification for adopting Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the research question. Subheadings will outline my decision-making process, delineating key junctures in my deliberations. I have deliberately separated the theoretical discussion of methodology from the application (Chapter 4). My reasoning is based on my professional experience where it is important to have a clear rationale for my actions and, in accordance with Finlay (2008), I recognise the distinction between the engagement in phenomenological philosophy and applied phenomenological research. Taking an applied approach, I must intellectually engage with the foundations of the philosophical tradition, and be able to translate my understanding into research practice.

Situating the Theoretical Approach

My research question offers various investigative routes, using alternative methodologies and methods (Richards & Morse, 2013). Potentially, my assumptions are based on a world that is dividable, observable and measurable. Alternatively, rejecting this ontological supposition, I can perceive a less tangible world, constructed by people in complex and dynamic ways, which is less accessible via quantification (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013a; Thomas, 2013). These two propositions are not necessarily antagonistic, with positivism and interpretivism contributing to the community of knowledge. Nevertheless, realising my world view determines my ontological stance to social investigation. Methodologists urge researchers to check the connection between the function and the method of the research (Arthur *et al.*, 2012; Thomas, 2013). In the same way, methodological decisions combine current personal views with intended professional outcomes. For me, this means understanding more about my educational practice. Participating in what Denzin and Lincoln (2013b) refer to as '*Phase 1 – The Researcher*' my ontological conceptions locate my thinking as;

- 1) People are people, despite the labels society attaches to them and 2) learning can influence change; on the one hand, apparently straightforward, on the other, a kaleidoscope of human experience. This reasoning is consistent with internal-idealist

ontology, whereby I cannot view or make judgements of the external world without considering my own internally driven realities (Adams, 2003; Arthur *et al.*, 2012). (Excerpt from my EdD Paper 1- The Researcher Practitioner, p. 8).

Ontological assumptions derive from personal reflexivity, where idiosyncratic values, experiences, interests, and ideals inform assumptions about the subject of existence (Archer, 2010). As a researcher, ontological clarity moves me forward, in terms of *how* I perceive knowledge and knowing (or my epistemological stance). Kvale's (1996) assertion of knowledge being in constant transition is pertinent to my own personal and professional attitudes toward the social, historical, cultural, and linguistic nature of its construction. Plus, in the opinion of Arthur *et al* (2012), the way I choose to seek, gain and understand knowledge grounds my methodological approach in the context of myself, as a researcher, and my research field. An approach for Thomas (2013) is defined by how people think about their social world, and my belief is that *thinking* drives change as opposed to pure *action*. In this sense, my understanding of Willig (2008) calls qualitative researchers to examine and engage with their personal and epistemological reflexivity using such questions as,

- Does my research question define and set the parameters for what could be discovered?
- Are the data and interpretations securely and transparently constructed from the study design and method of analysis chosen?
- What are the implications for understanding this phenomenon?

These questions identify epistemological reflexivity as having a dual purpose. Firstly they embed awareness of how my assumptions could influence the research process (Willig, 2008). Secondly, Anderson and Braud (2011) argue that epistemological reflexivity develops me as a qualitative researcher; so that I may come to know the research and myself better. The more I thought about and engaged with theory, the more responsive I became of absorbing new knowledge and considering how this fitted or challenged my current thinking and practice. Epistemological reflexivity is therefore considered as a distinct and inherent intellectual activity for inductive researchers. Overt connections between the researcher and what is researched establishes authenticity, originality and quality for the final report audience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013b) as well as for myself as the researcher (Finlay, 2011).

Selection of Methodology: Implications for navigation

Denzin and Lincoln (2013b) consider methodological decisions to be the second phase of the research process. My ontological stance combined with my epistemological assumptions guide my methodological choices about how best to address my research question;

How do distance learning graduates describe their learning experience?

My research question targets the retrospective investigation of a designated group of people who have taken part in distance learning. The phrasing of the question remains open to the discovery of individual perceptions, and understandings, of what the experience means. I am therefore asking the participants to describe so that I can interpret. This type of question and rationale resides within the interpretivist paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013a), referred to as social constructivism by Creswell (2013), whereby qualitative research absorbs, deciphers, and disseminates how people understand their experiences themselves and with others. Questions which surround personalised thinking and experience, permit qualitative researchers to translate personal insights into public language (Thomas, 2013) in order to gain new perspectives and understandings about how people experience the world.

Some methodological structures were unsuitable because they did not suit the research purpose. For example, I rejected grounded theory from an epistemological perspective. The underpinning assumptions of grounded theory, both in the early work of Glaser & Strauss, (1967) and later Charmaz, (2006) did not fit with my research ideas. Whilst this complex methodology has a number of variants, the overarching intention is to seek patterns in peoples' everyday lived realities of social phenomena, the problems they experience, and how they overcome such problems (Arthur, et al., 2012). These patterns are conceptualisable because they are viewed as independent of individual, time, and place. However, as indicated in Chapter 2; Literature Review, the lived phenomenon of learning can be considered as malleable and in some sense co-constructed with others through personalised interpretations of interactions (Rogers, 1959). Hence, my aim is to find out about the experience of learning at a distance, and I as an 'insider' researcher and the participants are integral within this. Therefore, grounded theory was not appropriate because the methodology sees the researcher as independent of the research phenomena, and seeks to observe patterns common across participants as explanatory devices. Whereas, I sought a nuanced position and a methodology that would preserve the individual voice whilst permitting me to investigate what distance learning is like in the proximity of my own teaching role.

Ethnography (Arthur et al., 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2013a) was also ruled out due to my interest in personalised and retrospective data rather than in observed here-and-now appraisals, so this methodological frame would not work for me. Case study was considered too, as it offers the possibility of gathering multiple forms of evidence and, is methodologically eclectic (Swanborn, 2010; Creswell, 2013). Yin (2014) argues that taking a case study approach could be helpful when exploring uncharted phenomena. Despite the potential opportunities that case study holds for in-depth enquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013a), I excluded the methodology because my research question attends to the specific nature of the personalised consequences. I wondered how much 'other' evidence, as opposed to dialogical offerings, would contribute; particularly within the ambiguous areas of attitudes, perspectives and assumption. These deliberations led me toward phenomenology as Creswell noted,

We see the constructivist worldview manifest in phenomenological studies, in which individuals describe their experiences. (2013, p. 25)

Reading further and wider, the vastness and philosophically orientated complexity of phenomenology confused me. I discovered many new ideas, some of which seemed beyond my intellectual grasp, others felt intellectually more familiar and inviting. However, central to my choice of methodology remained the research question and finding an approach which would most fit the nature of the problem detected and purpose of the research.

The Research Position: Finding a place to take in the view

Informing many qualitative research methods (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2013), the philosophy of phenomenology aims to detect how individuals perceive themselves and their world by identifying and exploring specific phenomena (Creswell, 2013). Indeed, for Langdrige (2007) phenomenology is an assembly of philosophically based research methods and not a singular entity, more akin to an ideological continuum, ranging from purely descriptive to highly interpretative, as Garza points out,

The flexibility of phenomenological research and the adaptability of its methods to ever widening arcs of inquiry is one of its greatest strengths. (2007, p. 338)

Finlay (2011), for example, argues that phenomenology is complex because people are complex. The role of the phenomenological researcher is therefore to become absorbed in the theory *and* practice of this philosophical tradition, and intellectually travel their chosen phenomenological route. The upshot being that Finlay (*ibid.*) advocates research either is, or

is not phenomenological, in other words, 'doing a bit of phenomenology' is ideologically, methodologically, and ethically incongruent. I understand this to mean that in taking a phenomenological approach, I must engage with traditions of phenomenological thinking and the practices of empirical phenomenological research, as both influence, inform and drive the research process.

Phenomenologists strive to uncover a person's own reality through their conscious, lived experience. Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), in founding phenomenology, wanted to understand how a person may come to know a specific experience in-depth and discern the prominent features of that experience. Husserl (1931 [2012]) believed experience held crucial, discernible elements, which go beyond the identified situation, shedding light on the experience to others. To meet this aim, he focused attention on bringing things back to themselves, lifting the assumptive veil (our natural attitude) to see things as they are. Husserl envisioned experience through the concept of *intentionality*. Intentionality directs our consciousness to always be of something, where experience is the consciousness of something we see, hear, feel, sense, or think about. Thus, experience is accessible because the 'something' is available to scrutiny, countering positivistic objective measurements of knowledge, independent of human interaction. Husserl argued that the inner world is a reachable place for enquiry via the phenomenological attitude. Aptly, what is experienced connects to how it is experienced, or using Smith, Flowers and Larkin's (2009) term, 'directedness-at-objects'.

Husserl uses the term *epoché* (or bracketing) to describe where the phenomenological attitude suspends all previous knowledge and sees as if for the first time (Langdridge, 2007). To achieve phenomenological insight, Husserl presented two processes;

- i) Phenomenological reduction, intending to isolate the experience essence via bracketing (Giorgi, 2011)
- ii) Eidetic reduction, contemplating different ways to see the phenomena, transcending the situation to discover the core (or essence) of what something is like (Smith & Osborn, 2008)

When engaging with Husserlian phenomenology, I found the concept of bracketing problematic, because of my ontological position. Taking the standpoint that 'people are people', I am a person investigating people in my own professional field. Phenomenological reduction incites the active distancing of myself from the professional background and current educational role which founded my enquiry. Reflexive realisations led me to understand the history and direction of phenomenology is neither straightforward nor orderly. The philosophy

and practice of phenomenological progression mostly occurs through an array of disagreement. Moran's book *Introduction to Phenomenology* critiques phenomenology via censures and approvals, stating,

it is this very diversity and conflict among the practitioners of phenomenology that leads one from an interest in the general considerations of phenomenology to the study of the thought of the individual phenomenologists themselves. (2000, p. 22)

In turn, my unease with Husserl's phenomenological *epoché* (deliberately halting judgment relating to the natural world and concentrating on the analysis of experience) steered me to interpretive forms of phenomenology and to the work of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). Heideggerian phenomenology centres on the critical question of *what is being* through the interpretation and description of human experience. Disclaiming attempts to understand *how we know*, Heidegger proposes knowing in terms of *what being human means*. My research question resonates with this intention, directing meaning toward the specified phenomenon of the experience of distance learning. Narrowing the interpretive phenomenological field further, I discovered Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). IPA spoke to my clinical, educational and ethical sensibilities as the associated phenomenological assumptions, structure and call for transparency.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

Jonathan Smith introduced IPA in 1996, in a direct attempt to establish an alternate, yet analogous approach to traditional positivist and interpretivist methodologies in psychological research. Originating in health psychology, IPA is an inductive methodology and not simply a means for data analysis (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). Located within the hermeneutic phenomenological paradigm, IPA encompasses a meticulous inspection of the participants' '*lifeworld*' (Husserl's '*Lebenswelt*') to the experiences of a specific phenomenon (Smith, 2004). In other words, personal meanings are attached to descriptions of the '*lived experience*', and, as confirmed by Eatough and Smith (2008), outcomes are deliberately nuanced and grounded in socio-culturally sculpted personal biographies. From this perspective, IPA work is directed to make insights available which;

- i) are contextualised to existing research
- ii) enlighten innovation within under-researched areas
- iii) provoke re-examination of what is already understood

Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) advocate operating in a methodological space which is welcoming of clarity, curiosity, and contemplation. Indeed, the six steps of IPA analysis deliberately guide the researcher to gain a descriptive understanding before progressing to deeper levels of interpretation from individual and shared perspectives (this process is demonstrated in Chapter 5). Consequently, IPA is distinct from other qualitative approaches as phenomenological, interpretative (hermeneutics), and idiographic components combine to create interpretive understanding (Eatough & Smith, 2008), as illustrated in Diagram 1. Whilst these components are not exclusive to IPA, the particular accents and procedures used classify IPA as an associated, discrete method in the topography of phenomenological investigation (Smith, 2007).

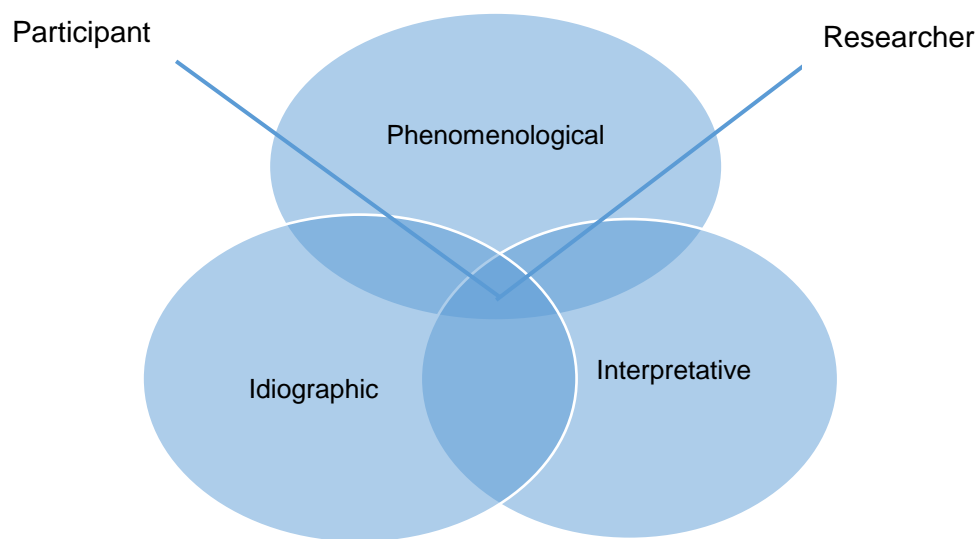


Diagram 1: Representation of the core components of IPA

In debating the term IPA, Willig (2008) argues that phenomenology focuses on human understanding, rooted within Husserlian ideology. Husserl's (2012) attention to the '*lifeworld*', asserted that reality is understood when perceived through a lens, untainted by the researcher's preconceptions. According to Husserlian ideology, it is impossible for analysis to be interpretative and phenomenological. In contrast, IPA undertakes the task of achieving an insider view of an identified phenomenon, by promoting the researcher to the central analytic instrument (Smith, 2004). Developments in twentieth century phenomenological thinking clarify the philosophical position of IPA:

- Martin Heidegger asserted the inescapability of experiencing the social world via our personal history and socio-cultural perspectives
- Hans-Georg Gadamer acknowledged that the past influences here-and-now appraisals, but that they are qualitatively different
- Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger both highlighted the situated nature and interpretive quality of knowledge: Heidegger, from the perspective of worldliness and Merleau-Ponty, in terms of our embodied relationship with the world
- Similarly to Heidegger, John-Paul Sartre viewed beings as constantly becoming themselves, rather than pre-destined, so free to develop in a world shared with others

Conversely, Giorgi (2010) refutes the philosophical foundations of IPA stating, the approach 'has little to do with continental philosophical phenomenology' (2010, p. 4). In reply, Smith (2011) emphasises that in effective IPA, researchers knowledgeably and actively demonstrate the engagement with hermeneutically orientated, phenomenological traditions; pertinently providing overt philosophically based anchor points for their reasoning and action. To detail how IPA is most relevant to my purpose, an overview of the philosophical underpinnings aligned to IPA research is needed and is presented as follows;

Phenomenology

As stated previously, phenomenology refers to the enquiry of how people describe their experience. The seminal phenomenologists Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Gadamer and Sartre influenced the construction of IPA (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) by developing Husserl's examination of an inhabited, 'lived world' as opposed to an isolated, passive existence. For Heidegger, it is only death that we have no choice but to face truly alone. Gazing toward the end of life, Heidegger emphasises existence as starting and, importantly, through time, knowing to cease. In the same way, we are 'thrown into' and inherently part of, a useful world, full of things and people. Yet our co-existent, finite nature is often lost in the assumptions and activities of everyday experiences (Laverty, 2003). Habitual acceptance of existence (Tietz, 2008) can mean experience is unnoticed and unquestioned.

In his 1927 [2010] treatise, *Being and Time*, Heidegger took the meaning of being to be of central concern. Ontologically questioning the very nature of existence, he moved away from Husserlian thinking where interest lay foremost in such psychological matters as awareness. Heidegger argued that Western philosophy had ignored the rudimentary basis of human existence due either to unquestioned acceptance, or because of the unreachable nature of

the question itself. In his exploration of existence, Heidegger uses the term *dasein* to describe the distinctive, contextually based features of human beings that he wanted to know more about. The English translation of *dasein* is difficult because the translation from German to English does not represent how Heidegger used the term (Harman, 2007). Cerbone suggests the 'Stambaugh translation' adds clarity as this, 'inserts a hyphen between the terms 'da' meaning 'here' or 'there' and 'sein' meaning 'being' (2008, p. 4). The hyphenated translation distinguishes Heidegger's meaning of *da-sein* and the word itself. In Heideggerian thinking, *da-sein* is always temporal and 'in-relation-to' other things; it is individually perceived, and experienced. Harman (2007) emphasises that *da-sein* is found in *mineness* which refers to existence belonging solely to the self. The feature of *mineness* distinguishes *da-sein* from objects because '*Da-sein's* own being is always an issue for it' (2007, p. 60), and *mineness* can only be known in relation to something else. Interaction underlies all IPA research since, for Heidegger, intersubjectivity characterises interaction because of, 'the shared overlapping and relational nature of our engagement in the world' (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p. 17). Merleau-Ponty extended Heidegger's views of the situational aspects of interpretative enquiry. Whereas Heidegger highlights the *worldliness* of being (our interaction with things), Merleau-Ponty (1945 [2013]) believed our bodies are fundamental to our relationship with the world, because it is our bodies which give access to a world that we can experience and understand using our senses. In a holistic sense, the 'self' discerns, acts in, and communicates with our world, and is not absorbed by either our body or our environment (Merleau-Ponty, 2013).

In contrast to Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty's ideas of 'the other', derives from an embodied perspective, meaning connections with others start from a point of difference and not similarity. For example, I can only view another person if I understand myself as separate from them. We can only ever imagine what it is like for another; we can never *know*, in the same way we can *know* about ourselves. Critically for IPA research, Merleau-Ponty (2013) assists in understanding the proximity between myself as the researcher and the participants. The physical body forms the underlying impression of knowing, in terms of the self, and the world; it is physical activity which grounds access to meaning in tangible, rather than abstract terms (Snowber, 2012). The experience of the phenomenon is represented by the body-in-the-world. Consequently, I need to acknowledge that the temporal experience is sited in, and by the body-in-the-world and not separated by cognitive, or affective perceptions.

Further developed by Sartre (1943 [2003]) and the existential movement, the implication of being-in-the-world recognises interactions with the world develop our self-consciousness. The world belongs to the person; an individual's perception creates their world, alongside being present with others. Self-consciousness may only become notable when observed by another

because humans are not static or 'given' beings, but constantly developing through our perceptions. So, the world is a dynamic place, as we are continually creating it. The idea of constant progression forms Sartre's prospects for what we will be, taking precedence over what we are now. He took the view that what is not present is as important as what exists, in our perceptions and experiences. From Sartre's stance on *nothingness*, I must be as attentive to what has not taken place as to what has. Furthermore, since experience is dependent on the perceptions of relationships with others, Smith, Flowers and Larkin note Sartre's suggestion, 'the clearest glimpse of what phenomenological analysis of the human condition can look like' (2009, p. 20).

Interpretative phenomenology maintains that understanding occurs through some form of interpretation (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre's thinking shapes the interpretive element of IPA, with each proposing the inherent and embedded connection of people to their worlds through things, others, aspirations, and apprehensions. Interpretative phenomenology is directed to an involved world, uniquely 'lived' by each person, and created through our perceptions and relationships. Though these perspectives have grown from the Husserlian tradition, ideas move away from descriptive and transcendental concerns. Interpretive phenomenology views experience as intricately lived, with each meaning illuminated via an embodied and contextualised world. Indeed, my research aims to conceptualise interpretatively how other people (i.e. the BSc course alumni) experienced a specific phenomenon (distance learning). The reason IPA is useful for my research question is because my work focuses on the participants' making-sense of their learning activities. Further, my interest directs me to what has happened to, and for, them since their course completion. To understand more of the experience, I now address the hermeneutic, or interpretational, element of IPA.

Interpretation (Hermeneutics)

Hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation, influenced and developed by the theorists Friedrich Schleiermacher, Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, provides the interpretative underpinning for IPA (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2008) because, as Smith, Flowers and Larkin note,

Without the phenomenology, there would be nothing to interpret, without the hermeneutics, the phenomenon would not be seen. (2009, p. 37)

Originally a much older and separate body of enquiry to phenomenology, the hermeneutic tradition was developed by theologians, initially interpreting scriptural meaning (Lavery, 2003), then branching out to include secular literature and historical texts. Alternatively, Sandberg (2003) argues the term is often incorrectly used to describe approaches relying on interpretation. Hermeneutics exceeds interpretation by including the method and intention of the interpretation. In this respect, the cultural and historical milieu in which enquiry is undertaken is integral to hermeneutic interpretation (Gadamer, 1960 [2013]) as the researcher's pre-understanding orientates to the subject of enquiry (Heidegger, 2010). Pre-understanding refers to the meanings held in our historicity (Lavery, 2003) which cannot be put aside because understanding is already part of us being in the world. Indeed, Heidegger (2011) proposes no encounter is void of connections to an individual's past. Our interactions with the world enable us to find meaning, while we simultaneously construct this world from our experience. For this reason, Heidegger's work joins the hermeneutic and phenomenological traditions as his search to find the meaning of *da-sein* necessitates the interpretation of experience.

With regard to the interpretive process, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) direct IPA researchers to the classical work of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), as his body of work influenced both Heidegger and Gadamer. From a wider outlook on the application of hermeneutic thinking, Schleiermacher asserted that writing amalgamated the writers' linguistic custom with their own use of their language, to elicit intuitive artistry in the text. When reading, we are viewing the inner world of another using the lens of our own preconceptions. Our internal dialogue with a text opens opportunities for deeper understanding of things as they are. Indeed, Gadamer writes that,

Schleiermacher speaks not so much of the lack of understanding as of misunderstanding. What he has in mind is no longer the pedagogical function of interpretation as an aid to the other's (the student's) understanding; for him, interpretation and understanding are closely interwoven, like the outer and the inner world, and every problem of interpretation is, in fact, a problem of understanding. (2013, p. 190)

Differing from social constructionist approaches, where analysis concentrates on the effects of the vocabulary, Schleiermacher (1838 [1998]) concentrated on the unique meanings of the words used. Schleiermacher's theories, based on linguistic and psychological interpretation call for the exposure of meaning *beyond* immediate assertions; to potentially reveal more than is known by the person him / herself (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Meaningful insights are justifiably drawn in IPA through hermeneutic extensions to participant narratives, via the intimate relationship Schleiermacher identified between interpreters and interpreted. The act

of interpretation raises the consciousness of the interpreter. The interpretation cannot be distinguished from the individuality of the interpretative analyst. Hence, the interpreter's insights are conveyed, not the narrators.

Schleiermacher's ideas merge Heidegger's phenomenological vision with hermeneutics by implying that human existence entwines people, objects, language, and culture (Lavery, 2003). Achieving an extended viewpoint of the text corresponds to Heidegger's concept of intersubjectivity, because of the requisite for the interpreter having common ground with the interpreted. Unlike Husserlian ideation, Heidegger proposed that it was inconceivable for a person to rise above or separate themselves from the ineradicable features of everyday life (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2008); asserting investigators' perspectives enmesh enquiry, thus openly establishing bias. Without a thorough understanding of this principle, or if I, as the researcher, pay little regard to my own self-awareness through reflexive contemplation, the susceptibility to naïve and detrimental researcher bias in IPA is exposed. IPA researchers acknowledge pre-understanding, as opposed to 'setting aside' or 'bracketing', in order to remain sensible to prejudices and presumptions encountered during data gathering and analysis (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). My pre-understandings influence how I understand new things, as present experiences sway my fore-meanings. Gadamer stresses that interpretative work necessitates that, 'we remain open to the meaning of the other person' (2013, p. 281). Specifically, reflexive awareness is not a choice in IPA research, but a primary component of the research process.

Similarly, Heideggerian fore-conceptions (or pre-understandings) are always present as depicted in Diagram 2, indicating the temporality of the human experience, or *da-sein*, because situations are inherently viewed in light of previous experience. In bringing together the past, present, and future, a way of knowing to *da-sein* is found. *Da-sein* refers to a being, as a knowing being, through the edification of what being is and means, in the temporal space (Clark, 2011). In this sense, *da-sein* overlaps with Collins and Selina's conceptualisation of a human-being in that, 'understanding comes from interpretation of being', (1998, p. 57) with hermeneutism being the study of understanding. Significantly then, hermeneutic phenomenology goes further than an analytic process, pointing to the very heart of what makes us who we are as people.

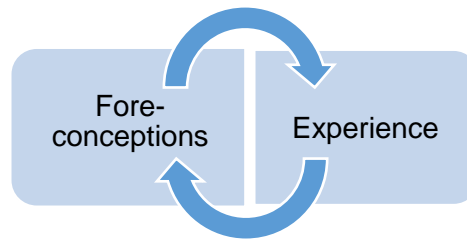


Diagram 2: Representation of fore-conceptions and experience

Since being introduced by Schleiermacher and Heidegger, Gadamer has developed the interpretative element in phenomenology. In his treatise, *Truth and Method*, Gadamer (1960 [2013]) expanded 'philosophical hermeneutics', progressing the work of Heidegger, which closed the gap in Heidegger's unfinished work. Gadamer (2013) proposed that people have 'historically-effected consciousness', meaning our history and culture (or context) inherently shapes consciousness (Simms, 2015). Like Heidegger (2010), Gadamer (2013) believed interpretation required conscious awareness of how culture and history influences knowledge, extending Heidegger's inspection of inter-subjectivity (Langdridge, 2007). Language is the medium of how 'historically-effected consciousness' is expressed. Indeed Gadamer believed (as did Schleiermacher) that nothing exists without language:

Wherever there is language, the originary verbal power of the human mind is at work, and every language is capable of attaining the general goal toward which this natural power of man is directed. (2013, p. 256)

Assuming language gives rise to conversation which creates what Gadamer (2013) terms a '*fusion of horizons*', to recognise the blending of present interpretation with the interpreter's preconceptions. This dynamic exchange activates and interconnects interpretation and experience (Langdridge, 2007). Gadamer (2013) too identifies with Heidegger and Schleiermacher, that preconceptions appear in the act of interpretation, raising through the interpretation itself. Smith, Flowers and Larkin agree that,

the phenomenon, the thing itself, influences the interpretation which in turn can influence the fore-structure, which can then itself influence the interpretation. (2009, p. 26)

Researching lived experience using IPA methodology leads to a fluid intellectual process which influences itself, and is provoked by previous thinking. Particularly, for IPA, the purist definition of Husserlian bracketing is unattainable because thinking responds to the phenomenon, hidden from view until sparked by insight, making all pre-conceptions impossible to know. For this reason, in Gadamerian terms, analysis is formed through a dialogue relaying new and previously accepted understandings. So, constant reflexive appraisal allows recognition of the researcher's influence in the analysis, encouraging overt participation in the process of interpretation (Finlay, 2011).

Nonetheless, Gadamer (2013) is cautious of Schleiermacher's claims of the interpretative analyst coming to know the narrator better than they may know themselves. Understanding gathered from a text is not the same as understanding the author of the text. Gadamer is clear that texts do not give us direct access to the past, we can only learn afresh from the words offered: we read in the present moment, so we see things as they are now, not as they were through the eyes of the author. And so, Biggerstaff and Thompson (2008) counsel researchers using, and scholars reading, IPA to accept that what is found in the data as indicative and provisional as opposed to complete, determinate or absolute. Regardless of intention or method, qualitative researchers are not removed from their past or present socio-cultural context (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2008). Indeed, Brocki and Wearden (2006) caution substantial flaws in IPA work occur when underplaying or losing the researcher's presence and role. This reasoning explains why interpretative struggles and '*hard won insights*' (Moran, 2000, p. 10 [emphasis in original]) bring forth new illustrations of the phenomenon, which are first sketched, then filled in with thick, rich and nuanced tones.

IPA conveys hermeneutic work as an interpretative art; the interpretative analyst crafts an understanding that the narrator cannot create alone. Smith and Osborn (2015) defined this as the *double hermeneutic* process, emphasising how researchers work to understand the participants' understanding of their world because interpretative analysis is inspired and moulded via interaction between a researcher and participant. Therefore, the relational intricacy between the interpreter and the interpreted is consistently exercised.

Idiographic Enquiry

Contrasting to nomothetic methodologies which direct attention to reliable, valid and generalised findings (Arthur *et al.*, 2012), an idiographic approach occupies concern over the exact nature of an experience, particularly attending to the specific context and temporal frame

(Eatough & Smith, 2008). Commitment to the idiographic approach demands a systematic research process. Attention to detail is vital in the production of a deeply interpretative final report. Using the participant's perspective, my insights, knowledge and reasoning combine to generate an understanding of the lived experience of distance learning. However, I must not assume the specific experience focuses on the person *per se*, because,

- i) The embodied nature of experience is unique and multifaceted, including aspects known to self and not known to self.
- ii) Experience takes place in a complex, relational world, where the concept of an 'individual' is always to something (or someone) else.

Significantly, the perceived 'individual' is not straightforward in the context of the phenomena because, returning to Heideggerian ideas of *da-sein*, beings are connected to and surrounded by a world of objects and relationships. The experience cannot belong to the person as it is always *in-relation-to* external phenomena, whereas people can give others admission to their exclusive, experiential and known perspectives on the phenomena in question. In IPA practice, this means as a hermeneutic analyst I need to;

- i) Continually recognise myself as part of the research
- ii) Preserve discoveries from each case via reflexive awareness through a heightened sensitivity to all of the independent stories
- iii) Reflexively and critically use the six steps of IPA data analysis
- iv) Ensure my cross-case analysis stays true to each participant via direct illustrations of the particular lifeworld of participants.

However, at the outset I found the concept of idiography intellectually challenging, and understanding came from an incidental experience, helping me to realise the meaning of the phrase 'continual reflexive awareness'. The intellectual instance described below exemplifies how phenomenological thinking is not isolated in the research context, but is a way of being, as illustrated in my field notes:

I've experienced idiography. Slowly walking my elderly dog across our usual field, the freshness of the air is on my skin and in my lungs. Birdsong breaks the absolute silence, and transient whips of cloud dance in the sky. I am in *my world*, experiencing and enjoying it through all my senses. Then, at the far end of the field, quite a way off, my eyes adjust to see the figure of another person. At this precise moment I 'get' idiography after grappling for days. The recognised shape of 'another' changes my experience by altering my perception and understanding of what 'had been' and 'what now is'. For me, the change is neither good nor bad, but different. I have no idea if the

other person noticed me, but importantly, I noticed them as they entered my consciousness. For me that's idiography, idiosyncrasy united with another, to create a change in meaning. No longer, an intellectual battle ground, idiography is beautiful.

The Hermeneutic Circle/Double Hermeneutic

The hermeneutic circle is an indispensable feature of hermeneutic phenomenology for understanding and interpreting meaning (Gadamer, 2013). As an intellectual system and iterative process (see Diagram 3), the practice of interpretative phenomenology is conceptualised through the researcher and research interactions (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Building on Heidegger's version of the hermeneutic circle, Gadamer saw conversation as driving a multi-layered, iterative exploration of the phenomenon, suggesting; 'a person who wants to understand must question what lies behind what is said' (2013, p. 378).

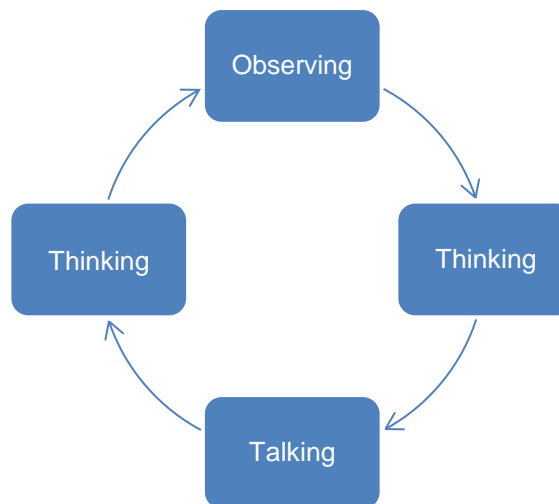


Diagram 3: Representation of Gadamer's iterative process

The hermeneutic circle, expands interpretative and creative thinking rather than being a process for reducing thought. Heidegger saw this iterative, intellectual process as unlocking pre-reflective insights, in other words, thinking that is not so influenced by our pre-conceptions or foresight that we cannot find originality. In the context of IPA, Smith and Osborn employed the phrase 'double hermeneutic' (2015, p. 26), stressing the duality of this interpretive process, in which,

- i) The participants' are interpreting their own experience (meaning-making)
- ii) The researcher is interpreting the participants' narrative (sense-making)

In practice, this intellectual activity is better represented as a helix than a circle because thinking moves further and deeper toward understanding as questions arise, not necessarily going over the same ground. Using the principles of interpretative phenomenology and the practices of the double hermeneutic circle, Larkin, Watts and Clifton (2008) suggest that IPA research reports should show the distinct layers of analysis: i) at the phenomenological level a descriptive account conveying an empathic conceptualisation of the lived experience, and; ii) deeper interpretative work, using hermeneutically-based analysis to connect philosophical and psychological ideas (Eatough & Smith, 2008). The gradation of hermeneutically based analysis resonates with the classical work of Schleiermacher, which Finlay (2008) regards as having relevance in a postmodern context. Schleiermacher (1998) interpreted publicly available historical documents, written by people unknown to the analyst, whereas IPA transfers hermeneutic thinking to the co-construction of personal narratives. The participant and the researcher are assumed to share the same temporal space and have something in common with each other. Subsequently, meaning does not emerge fully formed, as data analysis is an evolving process, rather than a single activity and my understanding of this gradually unfolded as the data came to life, maturing through my hermeneutic attention, inquisitiveness and increasing insight.

Justification of Methodology: Methodological compass

My literature review underlined learning experiences as a complex area of study. I needed a methodological approach, flexible enough to help me understand the intricacies of experience, and align to my ontological and epistemological assumptions. A particular phrase stood out for me when reading Smith and Osborn, who refer to IPA as, 'especially useful when one is concerned with complexity, process or novelty' (2015, p. 28).

Using Smith and Osborn's (2015) quote, I identified three criteria to guide my rationale for using IPA,

- Complexity – researching learning experience
- Process – retrospective and current potential for insights
- Novelty – focus on distance learning alumni.

To further support my rationale for focusing on the course alumni, the quote below from Brocki and Weardon indicates the legitimacy of my interest in present, subjective understandings of an experience that has already happened, consistent with the methodological intent of IPA,

to explore in detail the processes through which participants make sense of their experiences, by looking at the respondents' account of the processes they have been through. (2006, p. 88)

My justification for using IPA is encapsulated in four reasons;

- i) Brocki and Wearden's (2006) deliberate use of participants (in the plural) resonated with me, as an educationalist. The idiographic nature of IPA analysis, facilitates insight into an individual's own learning story, and prompts insight into essential, overarching themes; which may impact on mine and others' practice. Idiographic concerns connect with the HEI agenda of working with 'student-centred perspectives' (DoE, 2011; Universities UK, 2013a; QAA, 2014; ARUa, 2015; ARUb, 2015).
- ii) IPA challenges conventional discourse. Reid, Flowers and Larkin (2005) argue IPA is a useful methodological tool for discovering meanings constructed from complex experience where little is known. In acknowledging Thompson, Kent and Smith's (2002) position that IPA explores *process* rather than *outcome*, I aim to explore the process *and* outcome of the distance learning experience, boundary-testing this idea and expanding the applicability of IPA.
- iii) Practically, IPA offers a framework. There is accessible guidance, and a procedurally-based outline for analysis is helpful for novice researchers (Smith & Osborn, 2008). This point is markedly important in the debate about quality in qualitative research. Even though the structure of IPA is not prescriptive or concerned with replicability, it does emphasise transparent, detailed and layered analysis, providing overt quality assurance throughout (Finlay, 2006).
- iv) IPA developed and has thrived in health and psychology research (Brocki & Wearden, 2006); methodological interest is growing for educational research (for example; Denovan & Macaskill, 2012; Kumar, Shenoy & Voralu, 2012; Ecklund, 2013; Docherty, 2014). The extension of research contexts for IPA is defended by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), who assert the suitability of IPA in a variety of disciplines. For my research, balance is needed between issues of employing an approach which is not fully established in educational research, with it being the most apt for addressing my research question. Williams and Vogt (2011) contend that considered innovation within research approaches and design is imperative to enrich and progress knowledge.

My contention is that IPA focuses on the experience, not who the individual is, so is applicable to the enquiry of the learners' perspectives, in a higher educational context, as it is to those in a healthcare context, extending the Biggerstaff and Thompson discussion of the,

essential simplicity, paradoxical complexity and methodological rigour that IPA can offer as a research tool in understanding healthcare and illness from the patient or service user perspective. (2008, p. 2)

Returning to my ontological stance, people are people, labelled differently to suit different purposes. Epistemologically, knowledge is found within individuals themselves, and IPA establishes an exploratory environment. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) argue that transposition from one research field to another tests and expands methodological robustness and my research will contribute to this objective.

To summarise, IPA supports my research investigation as it is:

- an established methodology, epistemologically applicable to educational research
- supported through a growing body of literature, online forums, conferences, and IPA research community
- accessible because explanations and guidelines are given in straightforward language
- a route to engagement with deeper phenomenological thinking
- flexible and inductive in approach so aligns with my research question
- transparent through the layering of interpretation in the final account
- analytically supported by psychological and philosophical thinking
- reflexive and thereby places the researcher clearly in the research.

Chapter Summary: Focussing on the view

This chapter reveals how key phenomenological concepts have congruence with my research interest and research question. Whilst I found the philosophical backdrop complex and convoluted, some clarity is offered through Smith, Flowers and Larkin's (2009) structured guide through the interpretative phenomenological maze. Importantly, IPA is not an instruction manual, operationalising an intricate, philosophically driven methodology. As an alternative, IPA provides flexible scaffolding, promoting transparency at all stages of the research process; requiring knowledgeable researcher activity based in the hermeneutic interpretive tradition.

I have justified my selection of IPA as a methodological position by demonstrating, in this chapter, how a secure understanding of the philosophical base supporting interpretive phenomenology is necessary for me to conduct my research both as a phenomenologist and

as an educationalist. I combined my researcher-based understanding with the participants' efforts to understand how to produce knowledge of a defined experience of distance learning, framed by the unique contexts of our lives. IPA is both phenomenological, in the pursuit of insider descriptions of a lived experience, and hermeneutic, as understanding necessitates interpretation. Evidently, my interpretations are dependent on the context of the data gathering and myself as the analyst. In keeping with Heideggerian and Gadamerian thinking, my opinions are instrumental to the sense-making process and not negative biases requiring removal. In taking this subjective stance my observations and interpretations grow from, and around the data. Furthermore, as recommended by Finlay, my chosen methodology upholds authentic participation because I can use my world view to steer my research career,

Researchers should be clear about which philosophical and/or research traditions they are following. (2008, p. 8)

Emphasising IPA as a dynamic and iterative methodology, I accept that my preconceptions will have a substantial bearing on specific and generalised interpretations formed through interactions between two people, one labelled researcher, the other labelled participant (Anderson & Braud, 2011; Finlay, 2012).

This brief overview of phenomenology contextualises and explains IPA, setting the scene for my thinking about data collection and analysis. Through the research process, individuals offer researchers opportunities for knowledge building by sharing stories in which cognition, affect, physicality, biography, and culture establish important and sometimes undiscovered subtexts (Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005). I am not intending to produce objective truth. As my work is in a philosophical arena, I accept that experience is founded in, and possibly constrained by, socially constructed perceptions. A range of data gathering methods are available to IPA research and it is to these my attention now turns as the next chapter, describes, discusses and defends my research design and data collection method.

Chapter 4: Research Design

Part I: Method Description

Introduction

The proceeding chapters confirm that this research is focussing on the lived experience and impact of an undergraduate distance-learning course. IPA is justified as the most relevant methodology as an inductive methodological stance is needed to explore post-course perceptions. My reasoning for presenting Methodology and then Method arises from Caelli's (2001) argument, supported by Arthur *et al.* (2012) of distinguishing methodology (philosophical framework), and the method (research design) to minimise confusion in phenomenological research, by indicating how the method matches the philosophical position of the study. Research design is not the same as the method by which data are collected (6 & Bellamy, 2012), but rather stipulates the nature of evidence necessary to address the research question and how the evidence will be collected and analysed. Therefore, this chapter is separated into four parts to systematically demonstrate and justify my research decision and actions. Part I describes the method selected, Part II discusses the issues of selecting a sample, Part III is where the method is put into action and lastly, in Part IV the method is positioned in the (Double) Hermeneutic. The chapter concludes by placing the experience of data collection in the hermeneutic circle and reviewing the research design using Yardley's (2008) quality principles which are; i) sensitivity to context, ii) commitment and rigour, iii) transparency and iv) coherence, and impact and importance.

My decision to use IPA means the procedure for analysis is already specified in Smith, Flowers and Larkin's (2009) outline of a six-step, analytical process which intentionally advances from descriptive to interpretative insights (accounts are offered in Chapter 5: Data Analysis and Chapter 7: Interpretations).

Step	Process
1	Read and re-read transcript to get to know the data
2	Make initial notes to systematically capture observations
3	Develop emerging (prototype) themes for each case
4	Search for connections across emergent themes for each case
5	Move to the next case
6	Look for patterns across cases

Table 1: IPA 6 step analysis (original)

The previous chapter presents the roots of IPA, furrowed in the fields of philosophy and psychology in order to sustain 'the central role for the analyst in making-sense of that personal experience' (Smith, 2004, p.40) Finlay and Ballinger support such a claim by stating:

This variant of phenomenology aims to explore individuals' perceptions and experiences. Taking an idiographic approach, the focus is on individuals' cognitive, linguistic, affective and physical being. IPA involves a two-stage interpretation process as the researcher tries to make sense of participants' sense making. (2006, p. 260)

Phenomenological research encompasses the uniqueness of participants lived experience (Malim, Birch & Wadeley, 1992). Consequently, IPA is an approach, process, and method (Smith, Flowers & Larkin 2009), exercising an alternate perspective to positivist approaches by turning epistemological attention to 'a person's grasp of their world' (Ashworth, 2015, p.4). My study is evidently phenomenological, with no intention of generating objective understandings of external reality (Shaw, 2010a) as my work is about how individuals interpret events and objects to make sense of their experiences. Concern for subjective appraisal is methodologically congruent with my research question (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013a), permitting description (phenomenology), hermeneutics (interpretation), and idiography (unique and shared understandings) to emerge from retrospective, self-based appraisal.

Furthermore, authors (cf. Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; Roulston, 2013 and Smith, 2015) argue participant involvement is integral to achieving a subjective understanding. Whilst I am not going as far as the approaches advocated by McFadden and McCamley (2003), who discuss participants as potentially shaping every aspect of the research process, I am mindful of Holloway's (2005) opinion of data being a gift given to the research by the participants. In other words, the participants have knowledge that the researcher does not. My research design decisions are informed by Smith, Flowers and Larkin's (2009, p. 64) assertion of the participant as the 'experiential' expert, setting distinct roles for participant (knowledge provider) and

researcher (knowledge seeker). When describing a different participant group, Brocki and Wearden (2006, p. 100) determine IPA is 'entirely congruent with the increase in patient-centred research' and in Chapter 3, I argue for the same premise to be extended to 'learner-centred' research for my educational context. Thus, IPA is applicable to a range of disciplines, as theories from a number of sources can be drawn on as part of interpretive deliberation, whilst grounding the interpretation resolutely in the participants' words. Indeed, Smith and Osborn (2015, p. 26), contend IPA assumes an intricate 'chain of connection' between the participants' verbal expression, their thinking and their affective state, even when the connection is not overt or articulated by the participants themselves. Perceptions of the 'life world' (in a phenomenological sense) coalesce in the participant making-sense and the researcher sense-making (Shaw, 2010b). Biggerstaff and Thompson (2008) argue that phenomenological approaches, as in the case of IPA, can make previously unnoticed accounts, as in the case of the voice of the distance learning alumni, 'vivid' and apparent to others. To recap, the key features of IPA are;

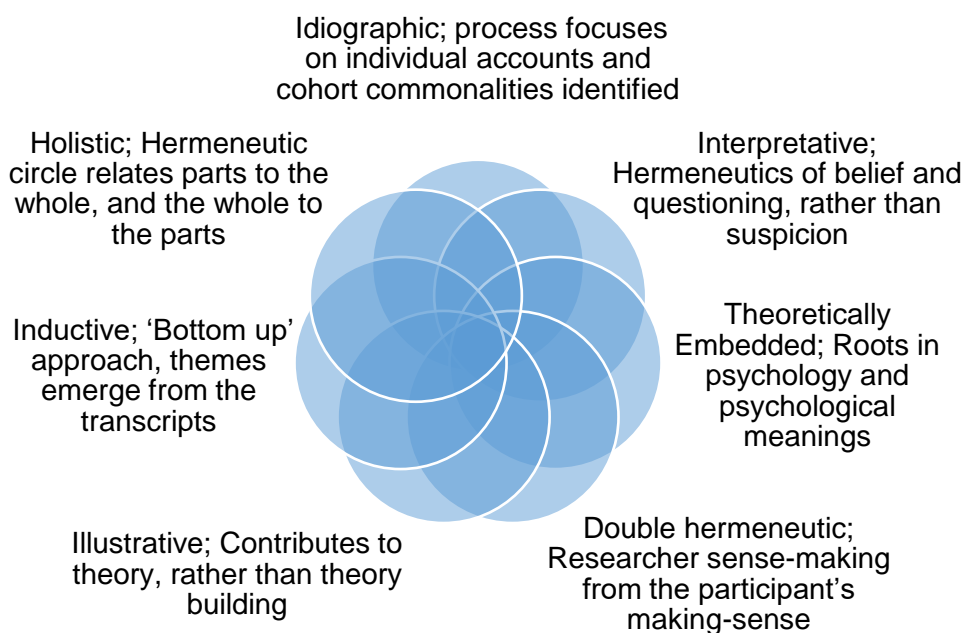


Diagram 4: Key features of IPA

Rationale for Research Design and Method

Mindful of maintaining methodological congruence to the assumptions of IPA, I saw my choice of research design and method as activities, bringing theory to life. Confirming my proposition,

Richards and Morse state, 'The best method for your project will be the one that best helps you think about your data and work with data in the way best suited to your research goals' (2013, p. 49). Of the research designs and methods available, my choices remained guided by i) my question, ii) methodological coherence, iii) ethical capability, and iv) the best outcome for the data generated (Arthur *et al.*, 2012). Having initially considered focus groups, technologically assisted chat groups and web-blogs (Sharpe & Benfield, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2013a) as data could be synchronously or asynchronously gathered, I soon excluded these in preference to individual interviews (Dilley, 2004; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Arthur *et al.*, 2012) because of my interest in personalised, in-depth appraisals. Prevalent in qualitative educational research, Brocki and Wearden (2006) observe that in-depth interviews are used frequently in IPA, as the intention is to elicit content rich narratives. To resolve the exact nature of the interview process and clarify who I would interview, I used my understanding of the issue of rigour to identify and anticipate potential quality and ethical issues for data collection, analysis and interpretation (Trafford & Lesham, 2008, Cohen *et al.*, 2013).

Investigating the available interviewing options brought sharp focus to ethical issues and primarily, the issue of consent in relation to data collection. Brinkmann and Kvale (2005) call for researcher care, as potentially powerful knowledge can be produced from close and subjective interactions. Consent deemed as 'informed', assumes the participant fully comprehends the nature and aim of the research, along with knowledge of the outcome (Miller & Boulton, 2007; Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). Likewise, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) remark that in IPA research, participants must give informed consent at the data collection phase, and need information about how data are to be used. The point is that requests for consent in phenomenological terms only confirm 'here and now' agreements. The interview is a dialogical voyage of language, which cannot be predicted because of the uncertainty and complexity of social interactions (Kvale, 2008).

Taking a phenomenological perspective, Gadamer (2013) views conversation as a relational exchange. Conversational partners seek insight to a particular issue, so as the direction of conversational travel is unpredictable, the outcome cannot be entirely controlled. The exchange unravels from insights into the issue itself, so we learn more as we converse. In this respect, Gadamer (2013) considers understanding is linguistically mediated, since language is the vehicle to engage with the world. In other words, being 'in' the world means being 'in' language, as language is used to gain insight into the world and ourselves. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty (2013) disputes that verbal expression indicates thought, as if thought and word were external to one another; rather, thought and language are interwoven, so language

is not the product of thought, instead, it is its body. For Gadamer (2013) and Merleau-Ponty (2013), language expresses who we are, in the context and moment of the conversation. Thus, consent in phenomenological interviewing is multifaceted and of the moment, requiring sensitivity and thoughtful management.

My research design situates the phenomenological interview in the ethical motives and actions of trust, confidentiality, anonymity and, responsibility (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012), accepting each research encounter, along with the practice of consent, as unique for each participant. And, in accordance with Miller and Boulton (2007) I accept consent to be an active process, rather than a stand-alone, single activity (Bryne, 2001; Nunkoosing, 2005, Denscombe, 2010). This necessitates a two-layered design, acknowledging the participants' agreement to take part and then to have knowledge of the gift of data they provide (Holloway, 2005). The second layer of the design takes place prior to analysis and interpretation, offering an opportunity to give a 'more informed' consent. For these reasons, the research design for this study is;

- 1) An individual in-depth, audiotaped telephone, semi-structured interview
- 2) A face-to-face transcript verification meeting with each participant.

Ethical Approval

The planned qualitative approach of IPA does not place the participants at physical risk, but the interview is an intervention, as people are asked to expose what they think, feel and know (Arthur *et al.*, 2012). Therefore, qualitative research must be conducted in an atmosphere of safety, trust and respect (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). Stringent adherence to the *ARU Policy and Code of Practice* (2007) steered my thinking, planning and research actions. In my approved ethical application (Appendix C), I placed reciprocity and beneficence as foundational to my attitude and interactions, as Walker (2007) acknowledges that participants may find involving themselves in research helpful, because they can openly share their experiences with an interested, yet neutral auditor.

I provided contact details to the participants from the outset, with my EdD supervisor acting as a second point of contact, mediator, and quality liaison. I enlisted external support via a colleague experienced in psychological well-being. The decision to participate remained with the participants unless their involvement in the research became or had the potential to become harmful (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). Had this happened, a discussion would

have taken place between the participant, researcher and supervisor unless immediate action was called for due to danger to health or life. In my pre-interview conversation, I emphasised that up until the participants signed over their transcript to me, they could withdraw or decline any questions at interview without any negative impact; reminding them of this at the time of interview as well (Appendix D). My familiarity with professional, ethical working practice extended to the research field, taking into consideration issues of power, protection, respect and safety and heightening my sense of responsiveness and responsibility throughout the ensuing research process. My reflexive awareness (Finlay, 2006) improved as my knowledge of the ethical implications of qualitative research developed, combined with the practical application of ethically based decision-making.

Semi-structured Interviews

van Manen (1990) discusses the dual role of interviews; the conversation is concerned with the meaning of an experience, plus interviews provide researchers with the narrative material intended to enrich conceptualisations of the human phenomena. Equally, Wimpenny and Gass (2000) suggest interviews are set apart from other data collection tools because of the researcher/participant relationship, shifting the observational nature of quantitative studies to the dialogical focus of qualitative work. Kvale questions the view of interviews, 'as warm, caring, and empowering dialogues' (2006, p. 481) by highlighting the power asymmetries involved in interview relationships. Additionally, van Manen (1995) notes the potentially negative consequences for the participant, researcher, and the research when interviews are not crafted and conducted with the participant experience in mind.

Aware of the importance of gathering the participants' experience via their detailed narratives, I considered various interview options. Interview formats are termed 'in-depth' (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p. 57), 'loosely structured' (Smith, 2007, p. 10), as well as 'unstructured' (Brocki & Wearden, 2006, p. 91), with the variables of topic, participants and, research context influencing the degree of structure (Roulston, 2013). Arguably, some level of structure is potentially helpful for sensitive topics, or for issues not usually found in everyday conversation, as in the case of examination of the lived experience of distance learning. For this reason, Smith and Osborn (2008, p. 56) promote semi-structured interviews as an 'exemplary' method in IPA research. The flexible format can overtly guide and be guided by the parameters of the research question (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006), separating the qualitative, investigative interview from other types of conversation (Kvale, 2008). Conversely, issues arising from using a semi-structured interview take account of how much direction to provide and the type of

questions asked and Kvale instructs; 'There are no standard methods, no *via regia*, to arrive at essential meanings and deeper implications of what is said in an interview' (1996, p. 180). Encouraging more open formats, Smith and Osborn (2015) suggest phenomena can be better explored because too much structure impedes nuanced expression and conversational spontaneity (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) concur, reasoning that through researcher care and attention, linguistic challenges can be overcome; providing opportunities for discovery rather than barriers to enquiry.

My intention was not to replicate each interview, but scaffold interactions with an overt, flexible structure. In doing so, I avoid what a number of authors identify as the mistaken assumption of employing high levels of structure or guidance for gaining greater detail and depth (Wimpenny & Gass, 2000; Kvale, 2008, Arthur *et al.*, 2012). My stance afforded the freedom of expression to the participant, whilst having tangible guidance for the phrasing of helpful questions, maximising the encounter (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009), and protecting (as reasonably possible) the psychological safety of those involved (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). The schedule is a technique to get closer to the participants' experiences, as Smith and Osborn clarify, 'the interview will be guided by the schedule rather than be dictated by it' (2015, p. 30). My interview format supports a dynamic, flexible and ethically-orientated research interaction (Walker, 2007), stimulating the iterative nature of conversational flow, rather being viewed or used as a checklist (Roulston, 2013).

Employing a semi-structured format, emphasises Fielding and Thomas' (2001) opinion that even loosely structured interviews require advanced preparation. Preparation enables what Kvale (2008) concludes as the interviewer being 'engaged' in the conversation rather than a detached spectator, casting questions to vicariously hook information. Instead, I judiciously examined my questions in view of the overall research question and study context, and amassed particularised data, relating to the participant's viewpoint (Denscombe, 2010). Moreover, Smith and Osborn (2015) assert the need for a balance between interview formats that are too broad and too precise with reflexive attention to what is happening before, during and after the interview. For example, I needed to be alert to overusing specific questions or repeating guidance as these may indicate the participant is not fully informed of the reason of the interview, not comfortable to openly share their story, is not finding the conversation meaningful to them, or has disengaged from the interview process. The intricacy of a semi-structured interview demands forward planning, in-action awareness and reflexive appraisal.

When considering the data, the participant stories I collected were told a year or more after the actual events. During this time, the participants may have possibly failed to recall or

interpret and/or reinterpret their experience. Finlay (2011) adapts van Manen's (1990) position that description and interpretation are part of one continuum, and not oppositional. Thus, the phenomenological hermeneutic perspective assumes the retrospective narration of experience. Focusing on what has happened whilst having the experience now, changes the experience in question because we are looking back from a different position. Hence, this study is my own analysis (rather than an unaffected, exact account) of how distance learning is experienced in the present moment by the participants. I accept that what I heard in the interview was swayed by factors contained in the physical, social and emotional environment of the interview, the participants' perceptions of me, use and access to language, and their social norms and assumptions. Therefore, I did not expect the interviews to elicit a pure description of experience, or gather accounts of experiences untainted by internal or external influences or distortions.

Developing the Data Collection Tool

When constructing a semi-structured interview schedule, the IPA methodology directs the core issues (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) because temporal descriptions are sought rather than abstract, generalised accounts. Mindful of phenomenological questions guiding and not unduly leading the conversation (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011; Smith, 2015), Kvale (2008) cautions that the very notion of asking a question is, in some way, leading because a response is anticipated. Remaining alert to not pre-empting the script and accumulating specificity from the participants themselves, I also tried to develop unforeseen perspectives or topics using Fielding and Thomas' recommendation for researchers 'to be neutral towards the topic while displaying interest' (2001, p. 129), Kvale and Brinkmann's helpful questioning approach of 'deliberate naiveté' (2009, p. 30), and Denscombe's identification of the researcher as, 'neutral and non-committal' (2010, p. 185). I see my researcher role as enabler, bringing experiences forward by encouraging participants to attend deeply to the phenomena, whilst remaining receptive to change and ambiguity. Todres (2007) suggests concentrating on *the more* of the experience, to build layers of meaning. Taking the view that participants are storytellers (Crowther *et al.*, 2017) and experts in their own experience, my interview format (presented in Table 2) is a survey instrument to gain access and explore more of their unique, experiential perspectives.

Question	Format for Core Questions	Purpose
1	Tell me about what is happening with you since completing the course.	Context building
2	Looking back, how would you describe the course?	Experience definition
3	Talk me through your experience of the course from start to finish, in as much detail as you can.	Reflection
4	From what you have just told me, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What are your main recollections? - What were the most positive features? - What were the key challenges? - Was the course what you expected? 	Establishing specific, descriptive detail
5	Thinking about home and work, how would you describe the impact of your participation and achievement? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Are there any specific examples you could tell me about? - At what point did you notice these changes? - Have other people commented – what has been said? 	Consequence of experience
6	In what ways do you think completing this course will help you in the future?	Descriptive impact
7	Is there anything that we have missed in our conversation that you think it is important to tell me about?	Experience checking

Table 2: Interview schedule

Data Collection

My rationale for telephone interviews grew from reflexive insights after preliminary calls with potential participants. After each call, I became alert to how their participation fitted in with existing home, work, and social commitments. Considering where 'best' to conduct the interview, exposed practical considerations of finding locations with ease of access and where clear audio-recordings could be accomplished. I realised as previous distance learners, all were well rehearsed in non-face-to-face modes of communication, and I contemplated various technologically assisted interview methods (Banister, 2007; Denscombe, 2010; Sharpe & Benfield, 2012). A networking encounter with a professional transcriber provided a range of examples of telephone interviews in qualitative research.

Telephone interviews are not new, although few qualitative studies use this option (Cachia & Millward, 2011). Holt (2010) and Irvine (2011) present the advantages of telephone interviews including practical factors such as cost effectiveness, quality of recording, and flexible access

to participants with minimal disruption. The disadvantages focus on the impact of the social encounter, particularly in the ability of rapport building combined with the absence of observable or non-verbal cues, which may convey subtle layers of meaning (Fielding & Thomas, 2001). However, the evidence-base dealing with the differences between telephone and face-to-face interviews is limited, and mostly based on impressionistic explanations, as opposed to systematic mode comparisons (Novick, 2008; Irvine, 2011). Published first-hand accounts highlight that concerns regarding rapport are overstated and unsubstantiated (Irvine, Drew & Sainsbury, 2010). Besides, Holt (2010) and Irvine (2011) agree that participants are more likely to check out if their responses are appropriate or give enough information and request clarification, which is essential to my study, where in-depth description is sought.

Contextually, Cachia and Millward (2011) regard telephone conversations as caller-initiated (in this case researcher), following an agenda-driven format similar to semi-structured interviews given that there is purposeful intention for the dialogue. Additionally, mutual engagement in a telephone interview provides recordable and transparent data (Norvik, 2008; Holt, 2010; Irvine, 2011), consistent with IPA's emphasis on high-quality data (Smith, 2011). From an ethical standpoint, my proposition ensures that I only gather data the participants are aware of, and the phenomenological premise of my study focuses on the participants' words. Therefore, telephone interviews can limit social and environmental distraction, permitting full attention to *what* is said (Knox & Burkard, 2009). Irvine (2010) cautions that telephone interviews require high levels of concentration, suggesting that they are conducted at a time and place where both parties can be attentive to the conversation. Likewise, researchers must check the participant's physical and psychological comfort, ensuring breaks are offered. In contrast to face-to-face equivalents, the literature suggests telephone interviews take less time (Opdenakker, 2006; Trier-Bieniek, 2012). Arguably, relating the length of the interview to convenience or data quality is difficult because as Irvine's (2010) comparative study of face-to-face and telephone interviews showed, supplementary data gathered in face-to-face interviews may be extraneous for the overall research question. Indeed, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) reason that more data is not necessarily better data.

To promote conversational flow and achieve a meticulous, unmodified record of the research encounter, I used digital audio-recording (Smith, 2015). Fleming, Gaidys and Robb assert recording is vital in securing the 'historical moment' (2003, p. 118) of the encounter. Investigating options to maximise the sound quality with the least intrusion, I sourced an 'Olympus TP-8' telephone compatible microphone and connected to a 'Roland R90' digital audio recorder, as recommended by the university transcription service. Accessing the equipment prior to the scheduled interview, I tested it to become technically proficient

(Denscombe, 2010) and equipped myself to make brief, legible notes during the interview. In Irvine's (2010) experience, useful data are sometimes provided postscript, when the recording has ended, so I informed the participants that I would be audio recording and making notes, building in 'final thoughts' to give time for additional information, before formally closing the interview.

Overall, telephone interviews were favourable for collecting phenomenological data because the modality combined my ethical standpoint with technically viable and methodological coherence. My data collection strategy was methodical, transparent and, participant-focused. I only collected data that the participants were aware of and will be able to review (ARU, 2007; Roberts, 2010; Hammersley & Traianou, 2012) using the least disruptive method for the participants, and which afforded the opportunity to gather thick, rich, textual data.

Pre-interview Piloting

The dynamic and responsive nature of IPA means remaining open and not pre-judging what may be discovered, so piloting was confined to the technological equipment (Burgess, Sieminski & Arthur, 2006, Denscombe, 2010) and the wording of the semi-structured interview (Roulston, 2013). After training, I familiarised myself with the recording equipment and appraised my ability to trouble-shoot, should a technological problem arise (Denscombe, 2010; Braun & Clarke, 2013). Regarding the semi-structured interview, I tested my initial design and subsequent modifications with peers, identifying problems with coherence, clarity, and cohesion in the questions and format.

Transcription

The justification for professional transcription of the interview audio files is a conscious attempt to halt the analytic process until participant verification takes place. Besides, IPA stipulates accurate representations of the interview and professional transcription removes me from what is actually recorded as opposed inadvertently hearing what I think by or putting my own 'spin' on the participants' words. My opinion contravenes Smith, Flowers and Larkin's (2009) thinking that the transcription process brings the researcher closer to the data. Until transcription accuracy is established from the participants' perspective, my analytic work cannot be securely considered. The participant-based process of data confirmation is an ethically motivated strategy for the face-to face verification meeting.

In readiness for professional transcription, encoding anonymised the recordings and storage was via a password protected, designated electronic file on the university computer server. As the researcher, I had sole access to the raw data. As a safeguard, the encoding information was in a sealed in an envelope, marked strictly confidential and locked in a filing cabinet in my faculty office. The contents of the envelope will be destroyed on conclusion of the research.

Face-to-face Verification Meetings

A second layer of participant verification is included in my data collection method, reaffirming fidelity to the systematic and transparent approach of IPA research. I chose a face-to-face meeting for this activity, distinguishing it from the interview. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) confirm that the transcript is central to IPA analysis, demanding ethically achieved and established content to uphold a participant-focused analysis. Not wanting to form premature analytic impressions, I wanted to be sure of the data available to me. I believe that participants in phenomenological interpretive work must know what they are giving to the research before the analytic and interpretive work can begin (Holloway, 2005), and must have the opportunity to use the encounter reflectively themselves (Anderson & Braud, 2011). Unlike member checking, the face-to-face verification meeting collaboratively sanctions the data to be handled in the analysis, since participants can freely check their transcript for accuracy, take out identifying features, and remove direct quotes they do not wish to be in the analysis and final report. There is no intention to change the data (Morse, 2015), rather the participant interaction with transcript prior to analysis, explicitly offers a greater degree of informed consent (Denscombe, 2010; Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). As such, the verification meetings closed the loop between participants and researcher in the data collection phase. The participants' signature on the transcript was a visible and deliberate act of transferring ownership of the data, in order to ensure clarity and ethical safeguarding (Haverkamp, 2005).

Confidentiality and Storage of Data

Morse and Coulehan argue, 'Protecting the privacy of study participants is a core tenet of research ethics' (2015, p. 151). Matters of confidentiality and anonymity are often tackled simultaneously in the research literature and ethical guidelines (Arthur, *et al.*, 2012; Hammersley & Traianou, 2012; Merrian & Tisdell, 2015). The terms are not interchangeable, but Brinkmann and Kvale (2005) determine the issues raised by these concepts are closely related, as confidentiality and anonymity interlink but are still conceptually separate; in other

words, anonymity operationalises confidentiality. Although, anonymisation alone does not address all issues of confidentiality, so in my study, the actions taken are shown in Table 3;

Issue	Action
The preservation of confidentiality in data/records	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Separation of data from identifiable material through encoded storage • Using password protected electronic devices • At the end of each interview transferring digital recordings to a password protected, electronic (designated) university file • Immediately deleting file from recording device once transferred to secure electronic file • The only place where the participant's own name and pseudonym are together is on the consent forms, locked in a filing cabinet at my University
Ensuring those accessing the raw data maintain confidentiality (myself/ transcriber)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working within existing codes of professional conduct, university policy and guidelines • Using confidentiality policy of the transcription service
Protecting participants identity by carefully anonymising people, events and places in the final report and future dissemination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issues from individual interview will not be discussed or shared with others in any way which could lead to participant identification • Checking the transcript with participants to remove traceable material • Removing traceable material in final report
Maintaining procedural transparency with participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensuring participants are aware throughout the research process of the strategies to protect confidentiality and the reasons why confidentiality may be breached

Table 3: Actions taken to preserve confidentiality

Moreover, Denscombe (2010) regards confidentiality as respecting personal information disclosed for a particular purpose, and the literature guides telephone interviews to have the same, robust procedure for safeguarding information as other methods of data collection (Norvik, 2008; Holt, 2010; Irvine, 2011). Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) propose that protecting confidentiality strengthens the relationship that grows between the people involved and the research itself. Reassurances provided in the preliminary stages of recruitment and during data collection defined the parameters of participation by clarifying core features of the research relationship. IPA research and analysis pays attention to the protection of privacy,

as final reports include verbatim quotes. The pseudonyms I chose indicate the participants' gender and through alphabetisation, the order of the telephone interviews.

Limitations of the Chosen Method

The limitations of my method exist in three interrelated areas; first, my novice researcher status results in limited tacit knowledge to draw upon. The nature of interpretative research is reliant on the data provided and directly linked to my interviewing skills and, whilst accomplished in my clinical skills and rehearsed with colleagues, I had not previously been exposed to a research environment. In addition, speaking about what has happened is not necessarily the same as describing an experience (Willig, 2008). Second, although my chosen methodology is established within health research, I am not only using this approach for the first time, my application is in a relatively uncharted context. Third, I am relying on others; notably, the participants' goodwill and ability (cognitively, emotionally, and practically), the transcriber's skill and accuracy, and finally, my supervisors' time and expertise.

Delimitations of the Chosen Method

With regard to delimitations (Punch, 2009), the parameters of my enquiry surround the experiences of a small number of people, supported by a distinct, qualitative methodology. Subsequently, my research does not offer generalisable data or provide an objective report (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013b). The sample does not include those who did not complete the course or who have completed in less than one year because the premise of my research is based on the need to leave a substantial period between completion and evaluation to determine the level of impact. If not, the significance of this research would diminish because there is existing work about in-course appraisal, as noted in Chapter 2.

Section Summary

The rationale for my research design and method has coherence with the philosophies, processes, and practices of IPA. My ethical stance developed into a viable set of actions, helping me to refine my research question. In reflexively placing myself in the research (Finlay, 2011) throughout the design process, Yardley's (2008) principles were instrumental in my deliberations and preparation for data collection. For example, I had to remain sensitive to the

distance learning context of the phenomena identified. My commitment and rigour had to be integral to my research decisions and activities. Lastly, the impact and importance of my work had to be balanced against the potential data available to me and the way in which I would be able to work with that data. In moving forward, the following part of this chapter presents the practical application of the methods I chose to use.

Part II: Method in Motion – Finding the guides

My IPA study used semi-structured, telephone interviews to offer the participants an opportunity to describe and share their unique account of the experience in order to help me idiographically understand more about my research question, 'how do distance learning graduates describe their learning experience?' The next section discusses the recruitment procedures and additional preparatory work.

Justification of Sample Selection

The strategy for my case selection was based on my methodology (Chapter 3) and the population available to me. Phenomenology is not usually deemed to be generalizable, nor does the approach strive to be (Finlay, 2013). IPA analyses are tentative and cautious, as findings are offered as insights and impressions, as opposed to definite or deterministic proof. The phenomenological position is to achieve rich descriptions of specific idiosyncratic experiences, so the outcomes cannot be deemed generalizable. Hence, I considered issues of transferability (Holloway, 2005; Finlay, 2006) when selecting my sample. To support this, I have provided detailed description of my educational setting, my decision-making and process so that my interpretative insights might have potential usefulness to those in a similar context.

In addition, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p. 192) discuss IPA as particularly useful in presenting a case for participants who could 'easily disappear in the aggregates of statistical analysis' in quantitative research, and those omitted from earlier qualitative research. As the literature review (Chapter 2) shows, the voices of distance learning alumni are usually absent, presenting an opening for my research to achieve a more informed understanding of the participants' own experiences and reflections. My sample was specifically selected, for their potential to give insight into the defined phenomenon (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) at a particular period of time.

Crookes and Davis describe purposive, homogenous sampling as, 'judgemental sampling that involves the conscious selection by the researcher of certain subjects or elements to include in the study' (1998, p. 151). A homogeneous sample is appropriate for my research question, which is directed to a distinct group (6 & Bellamy, 2012) because purposive, homogeneous sampling facilitates convergence and divergence espoused in IPA's inductive ideology (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). The sample parameter is established by the number of alumni of this course, available at the time of interview.

Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009) consider that the experience of a defined phenomenon contains potentially helpful, but hidden insights and so my sample was taken from the alumni of the BSc course, who had completed at least one year prior to interview. To clarify, the homogenous features of my sample inclusion criteria are;

- same course enrolment
- same time course completion
- members of first graduating cohort from a new course
- could be interviewed a year post graduating
- working in mental health at the time of the course and at interview
- qualified as registered nurses for more than five years
- no previous distance learning experience.

Smith, Flowers and Larkin, (2009, p. 49) recommend IPA studies employ a 'fairly homogenous sample', as IPA research is evaluated by the insights offered to the wider context. Whilst seemingly problematic with specific and unique cohorts, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) overcome the challenge through rich and transparent research accounts which interact with relevant literature; meaning readers can access and evaluate the transferability themselves. In recognising the need to have a distinctive, but characteristic sample of the people accessing the course, my sample includes men and women, who differ in age, social background, and academic attainment, but who share academic achievement and work-based commonality. Moreover, I am not suggesting that the cases are representative of the general adult, distance-learning population (6 & Bellamy, 2012). Consequently, I make no assertions beyond the group selected. Equally, no representative mix of gender, ethnicity or age is offered, other than the cohort available to this study (Langdridge, 2007).

Thus whilst my sample is narrow, it is well defined. The temporal nature of my detailed final report acknowledges and clarifies the parameters of my research to manage the tension

between IPA sample size and usefulness. Reduced numbers may be unduly considered as a limitation as Smith, Flowers and Larkin believe a richer depth of analysis can be achieved by reducing sample size, which may be inhibited with greater sample numbers, advising that;

it is more problematic to try to meet IPA's commitments with a sample which is 'too large', than with one that is 'too small'. (2009, p. 51)

Adding that,

it is important not to see the higher numbers as being indicative of 'better' work. (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p. 52)

The decisive issue is in the attainment of 'rich material' and so, small scale samples are preferred in IPA research. Therefore, the data collection method is intentionally in-depth, searching for data from the specific and subjective perspective of each person (Hammond, 2010). Indeed, Patton argues;

There are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry... The validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than with sample size. (2002, p. 244)

Ritchie, Lewis and Elam (2003) regard sample size as contextual and aligned to the nature and function of the research question. Table 4 shows a selection of contemporary IPA research projects and indicates the variety of sample sizes, reinforcing Pietkiewicz and Smith's (2014) direction that there are no set numerical rules. Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009) recommend a range of four and ten participants for professional doctoral IPA research.

Sample Size	Research
1	Eatough and Smith (2006) Shinebourne and Smith (2009) Rhodes and Smith (2010)
3	Dennick, Fox and Walter-Brice (2013) Patel, Tarrant, Bonas and Shaw (2015)
4	Smith (1999) Rodriguez and Smith (2014)
5	Eatough, Smith, and Shaw (2008)
6	Phillips, Elander and Montague (2014) Holland, Archer, and Montague (2016)
7	Wagstaff, Williams and Farrell (2011) Pearce, Thøgersen-Ntoumani, Duda and McKenna (2014)

Sample Size	Research
	Smith and Rhodes (2015)
8	Docherty and Reid (2009) Warwick, Joseph, Cordle and Ashworth (2004)
10	Millward (2006) Denovan and Macaskill (2013)
12	Dibb and Kamalesh (2012)

Table 4: Examples of sample sizes in IPA research

For the purpose of this research the four participants are in a position to provide a perspective as opposed to representing a population. Thus, the sample selected aligns with the inductive logic of IPA. I have overcome two key challenges proposed for IPA research samples by Smith, Flowers and Larkin, (2009, p.49);

- In practical terms, I have found people who are willing to help and are available in the defined timeframe. These are people previously known to me through my position as course lead. However, to mediate against potential power differentials or issues that may compromise the ethical integrity of this study, I chose alumni participants who have no current connection to the university and with whom I have had no direct contact for a year or more after completion of their undergraduate course.
- To facilitate an interpretative perspective, the sample includes a range of student characteristics (e.g. degree classification, gender, age and background) but importantly, the sample selection is contained within the defined phenomena of a single distance-learning course.

Denzin and Lincoln (2013b) contend credibility is not reliant on sample size, rather the openness and richness of the data garnered, combined with the researcher's analytical skills. Willig views the opportunities to work with small samples as promoting 'more room for creativity and freedom' (2008, p. 69) than potentially alternative qualitative approaches afford, and is of special importance in cases of under-researched groups. As with some areas of healthcare research, where the research area may be 'outside the perceptual field' (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008, p. 216), the alumni of distance learning are also an overlooked group.

In summary, to preserve methodological fidelity, my selected sample is consistent with Smith, Flowers and Larkin's (2009) argument for small samples to inspire deep and vivid analysis, which larger numbers may miss. Reid, Flowers and Larkin (2005) claim less is more in IPA samples as thorough investigation surpasses broader, superficial and descriptive analysis

(Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). Attentive to a common research error of collecting too much data (Arthur *et al.*, 2012), my plan gives ethical justice to the words of the participants (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012) because, their meaning-making combined with my sense-making, creates a dynamic, hermeneutic interaction which must be fully explored and which would not be viable in larger samples.

Recruitment of Participants

I sent emails to the 13 graduates from the first cohort of the BSc, informing them of my intention to carry out a post-course research project focusing on experience of distance learning. I invited them to make contact if they were interested in potentially taking part. Table 5 displays the response outcome,

Response Outcome	Number
No response	3
Did not meet the full inclusion criteria; career progression to strategic role ($n=1$) change of professional focus ($n=1$) career break ($n=1$)	3
Declined (ill-health)	1
Met inclusion criteria and agreed to participate ($n=2$ unable to confirm availability in timescale)	6

Table 5: Response outcome

In noting de Witt and Poleg's (2006) view that sampling in IPA research is established through the willingness of people to take part and my inclusion criteria, the potential sample frame (Denscombe, 2010) contained six people. I then selected two men and two women, each representing a different degree classification (1st, 2:1, 2:2 and 3rd). As suggested by Holloway (2005), I remained in contact with the remaining two people, as a contingency plan to manage unforeseen issues or participant withdrawal. Therefore, as the four people who had shown interest had the required characteristics to meet the purpose of this study and could participate in the designated timeframe, I took the methodologically congruent decision to work with this sample for my research.

Gaining Consent

After achieving ethical approval, I emailed the selected sample of four, to arrange a time for an informal telephone discussion about the research. With agreement to participate, I emailed and posted information, including the interview schedule and consent form (Appendix D). On return of the signed consent form, collection of the telephone interview data could proceed, along with a pre-interview telephone call on the day before (Appendix D). The pre-interview call served as a means to answer any final questions and confirm our arrangements and I verbally confirmed consent at the commencement of each interview recording.

Introduction to the Participants: Adam, Ben, Cate, and Dora

Name	BSc Level	Pen Portraits (information agreed with participants)
Adam	2.1	Adam is 35 years old, and has two children under the age of five. He grew up in a village on the outskirts of a large city in the east of England and continues to live in the area. Qualifying as a mental health nurse aged 24, he remained in the same NHS Trust where he trained. Previously working in both community and inpatient settings, he now manages a specialist service for people who experience severe and enduring mental health issues. Participating in a range of continuing professional development courses before enrolling, Adam chose this course to fulfil the requirements of his present position and develop his professional knowledge.
Ben	2.2	Born and educated in Africa, Ben moved to the UK when he was 25. Now 48, he is married with children aged 14, 12 and six. Ben is a general nurse, qualifying in his country of origin and NMC registered. He has worked in the NHS and is currently deputy manager of a large private care home, near London. The elderly residents have mental health issues, including dementia and co-morbid physical health concerns. Ben has worked for his present employer for 10 years. Career progression and the need to develop a better understanding of mental health care instigated Ben's enrolment on his degree.
Cate	1 st Class	Cate is a 41 year old, single mum of two teenage children, living in an urbanised area in the south east of England. She initially qualified as a mental health nurse in her early 20s but left the profession soon after to raise her family. She completed a return to nursing course and began working as a community nurse in a service for young people experiencing psychosis, where Cate is now a senior practitioner. Cate had a long-standing goal of achieving a degree by her 40 th birthday. Aged 37, Cate discovered she has dyslexia.
Dora	3rd	Aged 49, Dora is single and lives with her beloved dog in a seaside town. Dora is close to her immediate and extended family, who live in the same area in central England where she was born and raised. Dora has regular contact with her family, visiting frequently. Working as a nursing assistant for many years, Dora completed a diploma and qualified as a mental health nurse eight years go. Since then, she has progressed to ward sister and manages acute inpatient services for an NHS Trust in the south of England. Dora's clinical position necessitated a degree level qualification.

Table 6: Pen portraits of participants

Having developed an ethically-approved research design, selected a method for data collection and confirmed participation from the alumni, I move now to the next stage of the research process. Using direct extracts from my field notes, this section brings my experience of data gathering to life by integrating research theory and practice. My reasoning is to demonstrate reflexively, my phenomenological researcher skills and insights. The following content also sets the scene for the data analysis in Chapters 5 and 7.

Part III: Method in Action – Data gathering

Extract from field notes: Thoughts prior to commencing the interviews.

I'm at the point of doing. The last two years have been about thinking, debating and planning. Now I'm here, embarking on data collection: translating my understanding to practice. Have I made the right choices? Do I know what rich, thick data even means or looks like? With the interview schedule rehearsed and the audio recording practised, I have to quieten my mind, ready to listen to the stories waiting to be shared. I feel a sense of responsibility: the participants are offering me their precious time and insights. I'm grateful for their altruism and will repay by doing my best with their words. I hope I succeed, and they too gain from our interaction. Phenomenologically, Heidegger reminds me of inhabiting our own 'situatedness', I want to discover what this means for the participants and for myself; together, we may be able to narrow the gap between the known and unknown. For me, this is the reason for my study, to weave the individual with the collective, allowing the narrative picture to emerge. My field notes are more important now, harnessing my ideas and insights, separating what is mine and what belongs to others and grapple with the differing exploratory threads.

This example is indicative of how field noting enabled me to further embed myself in the research process as an educational researcher, through continually writing and reflecting.

Experience of the Interviews

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) recognise that engaging in a research interview is a novel experience for most people and the expectations may be unknown. So, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) recommend researchers provide guidance ahead of time to explain the format of the interview (Appendix D). I therefore issued the participants with the interview schedule prior to interview, bringing transparency and structure to aid our forthcoming 'conversation with a purpose' (Burgess 1984, p. 102). I had reiterated the reason for the interview on several occasions, including at the recruitment stage, at a pre-interview conversation the day before,

and at the beginning of the interview. Providing the interview schedule ahead of time allowed us to share a reflective space, supported by the parameters of the research.

Holt (2010) emphasises the need to prepare telephone interview participants, specifically about the need for in-depth responses anticipated in qualitative interview genres. I used the informal, preliminary calls to reaffirm personal introductions and plan our research encounter. We discussed and negotiated the location of the interviews. I chose to call from my study at home, as I could control the environment, ensuring privacy. The participants agreed to find a location convenient for them, with a landline, where they would not be disturbed. The freedom to choose the location for interviews meant that the participants had control of the interview setting and could be in a place where they would be comfortable. Commencing each interview with initial welcoming comments and checking consent to record (Roulston, 2013; Smith, 2015) gave me a transitional space to attune to the participant's exact words, and reminded us both that our words were being captured on a device invisible to them. I asked if the participants had any questions and reminded them that they were able to decline to answer any question without censure, halt or stop the interview at any point, including for breaks.

Before each interview, I found myself developing a routine, including writing in my field notes to settle my thinking and attend to the task ahead. In a sense, I prepared the room as if the participant were about to walk in. As seen from the field note extract above, the experience of settling and 'honing in' directly translated into the interview context. During each interview, I sought clarification throughout, using a process of 'funnelling' (Smith, Flowers & Larkin 2009, p. 61), extending the enquiry from broad issues to more personally-orientated content by gradually asking more exacting questions. As opposed to passively recording, my actions demonstrated active listening (without visual cues) and investigative involvement. I used probes and prompts (Roulston, 2013) to gain further information, querying thoughts, feelings and images springing to mind from their descriptions to further capture personalised meanings. Greater levels of depth fuelled more content, providing better insight into their experience and world. As I listened, I reflected the participants' words back to them to confirm my understanding and reaffirm that I had accurately heard their 'truth'. In Heideggerian terms, 'truth' (*Aletheia*) is related to either 'unconcealment' or 'uncovering', because *da-sein* is considered the central locus of truth (Heidegger, 2010). My handling of the concept of 'truth' is in respect of speaking from a personal perspective, to attain an authentic meaning.

Reflexive Appraisal Post-interview for the Participants: Adam, Ben, Cate, and Dora

Holloway (2005, p. 143) discusses how, during data collection, field notes can keep track of the researcher's responses and reactions, charting the 'decision trail' by adding transparency to the reflexive process (Finlay, 2006; Clarke, 2009). I noted my thoughts prior to the interviews, immediately at the end and on numerous occasions thereafter. Quickly capturing my experience on paper allowed me to 'see' and keep hold of my thoughts, untouched by time (Clarke, 2009). van Manen (1995) suggests that reflexivity enables links to form and be explored by involving my researcher interpretations with the descriptions contained in the participants' narratives. Table 7 is a further illustration of how I used my field notes to record contemporaneous reflexive observations;

Name	Extract from field notes
Adam	<p>I sensed the words raising from the unknown in Adam's opening dialogue. Referring to change and development, his ideas about self-responsibility turned my head from course leader to listen with the ear of a researcher. Adam talked about a course that whilst familiar, was now new. His content so different, so 'owned' and so removed from the university 'traffic light system', determining module success.</p> <p>Adam relayed impact, not superficial observations of course delivery; this was far deeper and more enlightening. His reflections causing himself some surprises, utterances that unlocked previously hidden pockets of understanding. Merleau-Ponty (2013) describes language and thought as inseparable; through speaking to 'another', Adam made his own discoveries. I said little, I didn't need to interrupt his reflective recital. Should I have implored for more? But to what end – would I have heard Adam's voluntary vocabulary or a communication channelled through my pre-determined intentions? Or do I gratefully receive what Adam gifted, accepting this as what he could offer in the moment? Neither Adam nor I can answer this conundrum, but for now, I am grateful to have been allowed into his lived experience. I will share his transcript with him ask that he 'sign it off' for me to use. With agreement, I will value and care for his data, hoping that it will continue to speak to me some more.</p>
Ben	<p>Ben was helping me. His answers were detailed and contextualised. He wanted me to know about his experience. The opportunities and challenges presented in the same tone, with equal significance, as if two sides of the same coin, one no less important than the other. Whilst Ben talked of his own learning experience, his experience was an experience with others, either fellow students, tutors, family or colleagues. The insight is thought-provoking, because distance learning is criticised for 'learner isolation'. Ben was far from alone; his new learning directly connecting to others.</p> <p>Just as he wanted to '<i>grow</i>', he wanted others to grow too. Ben studied so his family could have '<i>a better life</i>'; using the vocabulary '<i>to progress</i>' and '<i>to learn</i>' interchangeably, suggesting an inherent connection and both requiring '<i>hard work</i>'. 'Hard work' is important to Ben. I felt touched by his recollection of his young daughter getting her school books out so they would '<i>do homework</i>' together.</p>

Name	Extract from field notes
	<p>In my academic role, I've focused on the academic requirements and regulations and scarcely thought about how, where or when academic work actually gets done. I don't ever see their hidden worlds that influence the learners so profoundly. For example, when I called, Ben's son suddenly wanted his father's attention. Ben gave him some options and finally said; '<i>you have to make a choice now son</i>'. In this beautifully poignant moment, I saw my research in the temporal frame, part of a life, happening right now. Heidegger's project aimed to rediscover the concealed connection and synergy between being and time. I may be asking the participants to reflect but Ben and his son brought me into their present moment. I'm grateful to both of them, because I learnt an important lesson today.</p>
Cate	<p>The conversation with Cate started in a muddle. The interview on top of a hectic morning of high level clinical risk management. Before we started recording, Cate joked about having to 'switch heads'. As the conversation progressed, Cate found her experience again. The order of the modules merged as representations of one experience and expressed by a series of recollections. Cate's description tallies with ideas of an adult learner; setting herself a goal and managing competing demands throughout the course. She actively used the university resources for more than just 'content' learning. Proactivity and tenacity aided understanding of her learning needs, making this a 'bigger' and far-reaching learning experience. As a distance learner she discovered, initiated and engaged with the support available. For Cate, the word 'distance' is misleading, as her learning experience was upfront and personal.</p> <p>I heard how personally difficult exposure to learning is, as an adult. Not knowing resulted in negative self-appraisals, fashioned and fathomed many years ago. For Cate, tutors became gatekeepers, opening and closing the learning experience. I learnt Cate is an expert on herself, authentically translating thoughts into words without the masks of 'spell-check' or social triggers. Sometimes her ideas and memories were carried in higgledy-piggledy sentences, slowly forming a unique narrative, every word having its own, eventual purpose and function. On occasion the choice of word was not quite what Cate wanted, but the meaning just needed time, respect and confidence to ripen.</p>
Dora	<p>The several interruptions served as signs of Dora's world, the situation she found herself in was, in her words '<i>not ideal but would have to do</i>'. Her asking where we were up to and giving one word answers prompted her back to an unfamiliar self-appraising dialogue. When Dora's thoughts settle, they evolve, telling me about herself; she is busy, has constant conflicting demands, likes to find her own ways of doing things, and has <i>to be flexible</i> or she would <i>snap!</i> Dora gave a panoramic, pragmatic and self-startling view of her amended view of education. Just as I am finding my research meaning, Dora continues to find meaning in her own learning.</p> <p>Here the functions of language are manifold, words expressed; conjured, recollected, illuminated, emphasised, connected to find thoughts: with the aim of sharing something. Dora's choice of words and their blend of subtlety, forcefulness, wit, and affect relayed a significance, not previously revealed. Her words suspended in a much wider context, comprising the past and up-to-the-second present. I was with the 'present' Dora. I originally saw the course an isolated event, but the relevance of Dora's degree award unfurled from previous, and toward future chapters in Dora's life.</p> <p>Dora's frustration of failing her final module, reminded me of Halling's opinion; 'Our lives we must acknowledge, are as much about frustration and disappointment (in</p>

Name	Extract from field notes
	ourselves and others) as they are about renewal and satisfaction' (2009, p 2), because she used the experience to examine her own context. Phenomenologically, context is a situation's explicit and implicit meaning; associating with Halling's (2009, p. 21) illustration of how the psychologist Louis Sass sees interpersonal understanding as not 'getting inside someone's head' or 'achieving a communion of souls' but looking at what the other looks at. Our conversation allowed me to imagine the world through Dora's eyes by attuning to my own emotional and intellectual responses.

Table 7: Reflexive appraisal immediately post-interview, extracts taken from field notes

Verification Meetings

The verification meetings bridged my data collection and the IPA six-step analytic process. I did not read the transcripts or listen to the audio recordings before the verification meeting, so Step 1 of the analysis (reading and re-reading) initially took place with the participant. I negotiated the time and location for the meeting once I had received notification that an electronic version of the transcript was ready. I then printed two copies so we would have one each. To start the meetings, I clarified again the goal of the transcript verification and asked if I could note spontaneous comments that I would make available at the end of the meeting. I established that we would not be changing the transcript, but checking for accuracy, typographical errors, identifying comments and identifying quotes for removal from the analytical and writing-up stages. At final stage of the meeting, I asked the participants if they would sign their transcript and explained that in doing so, the right to withdraw would cease.

The extracts from my field notes in Table 8 (in the sequence of the meetings), reveals how my thinking changed from an observer gathering data to a phenomenological inquirer. The transition is notable as my experiential knowledge began to lift the black and white words from the pages of the transcript into the light of lived through experiences.

Name	Extract from field notes
Cate	I meet Cate before she begins work. Sitting on a park bench, with coffee cups in hand, Cate spoke of her eagerness to read the transcript. On first sight, she casually flicked through the pages, commenting; ' <i>did I really say all this – our conversation went past so quickly, did I give you the right answers?</i> ' I am back with 'student' Cate, recalling her perseverance to get things 'sorted' in her own mind, but this time, Cate laughed. We decided to read through the pages together. In view of Cate's dyslexia, I gave reassurance that we would read at her pace and clarify as needed. Cate read with much care and attention, obviously returning to sentences, checking her words, in her terms. We read in silence, sipping coffee.

Name	Extract from field notes
	<p>Every now and then, the quietness broke with soft chuckles or an 'ahh' or 'oh, change that: I said his name!'</p> <p>Cate reiterated the course as a personal experience, a goal set for herself. Her determination driven by a previous lack of academic success. She wanted to do well and placed pressure on herself. Knowing the course to be time bound, her academic resolve impacting on her home, work and social life for two years. Cate committed to her <i>own</i> success. On several occasions Cate noted her comments about the course organisation. Organisation from a structural sense is well documented in the literature, but Cate raises something more here than purely pedagogic construction. Organisation for Cate refers to security, caring, knowing, trust and quality assurance, saying; '<i>I knew that the people who put this together (the course) cared about what they did and wanted us to do well</i>'.</p> <p>Seeing her thoughts in words gave direct links to learning. Cate told how the transcript would be preserved as a personal record of her degree. The act of reading and interpreting words is synonymous with the work of Gadamer. When I first read about Gadamer, I envisaged hunched figure pouring over each word, each sentence, and each paragraph of dusty old tomes of manuscript. Sitting here with Cate, gives me a new understanding because Gadamer recognised authentic engagement with reading, demands awareness of the intersubjective nature, (person with person) of understanding. He viewed language as a medium for sharing the complexity of human experience. With Cate, I saw how, at times her sentences were jumbled because she was 'sorting out' her ideas through the spoken word. We read the transcript together, having the same words on the page but our experience, exclusive. For Cate, a personal experience; for me, relocation to a phenomenological researcher. Cate signed both transcripts and other than minor amendment, no content was removed. She concluded by saying; '<i>it's all yours – good luck and let me know when you have finished</i>'.</p>
Dora	<p>I arrange to meet Dora at her work, after shift. I get a call '<i>I'm running late, I'll be with you when I can</i>'. Next thing a nurse appears, asking if I wanted a drink, I decline. Despite Dora's hectic shift, she had foresight and caring to check on me. The extension of hospitality makes me aware Dora has given to my research, when she didn't have to. I have worked on busy acute wards. I know those days when you simply have nothing left to give, Dora is still giving.</p> <p>I felt uneasy and start thinking who the verification is for? Dora blasts in, '<i>I need a drink: bet you do to</i>' and disappears, returning with 2 steaming, dark black coffees; she slumps in the chair. '<i>What a morning!</i>' she laughs. I apologise for taking her time. Dora replies; '<i>Sally this is important, it's not a chore, I promise</i>'. I ask Dora why and she responds; '<i>I now realise learning is important and we need to find out more about it</i>'. I check if I can make notes and she immediately repeats her statement. My research with Dora is a shared activity. We decide to each read a copy, handing it over, Dora is emphatic; '<i>I want to see what I have said</i>'.</p> <p>After making minor amendments (change of name and typographical errors), Dora commented on the interview; '<i>I didn't know I had so many words in me! I hadn't really thought too much about the course when I finished, I just carried on with the next thing. I was glad it was over!</i>' Dora laughs, '<i>No seriously, it's only since doing this that I put things in place in my head. When you called, I just started talking. To be honest, I hadn't given any thought to what I was going to say.... I was surprised all that was there: just all came out... We talk of reflective practice but who has the</i></p>

Name	Extract from field notes
	<p><i>time, really? It's a shame because you can you only realise what you have learnt when you reflect, especially as I have now discovered, with someone else'</i></p> <p>Dora talked at length about the significance of seeing our transcript and our meeting; <i>'I may never open this up again (folder with transcript in it) but I know it's there – it's my reflection of the course, which to be honest I wouldn't have done to this extent. It's been good for me, it's made me stop and think again. It's so chaotic here that I need someone else to put the brakes on'</i>. Dora then commented on her participation in the research, <i>'I've not done this before, well not that I've known! (laughter), It's been good: reading through this (the transcript), I'm part of what you're doing and I'm really happy to help, not sure if I have or just given you a headache! (laughter) But seriously, it's been good'</i>. At the end of the meeting, Dora signed both copies and checked my notes. As I left, she said, <i>'it's nice to give something back, thank you'</i>.</p>
Ben	<p>Ben arrives on time, I see him walk in. When I say I see him, I assume its Ben because of his sense of purpose. The others around him are clearly new students, hovering around, carrying logo laden bags. <i>'Hello Ben'</i> I say, and he turns, smiling widely. To an onlooker, here is the greeting between two familiar people, we have only seen each other at graduation – all other communications being technologically facilitated. We shake hands in a professional but relaxed manner, these opening few seconds set the scene for our meeting. We chatter about the general things of life as we head to the place of our meeting; he was on annual leave, had been busy at work and his family were fine. Explaining the purpose and parameters of our meeting, I asked how he would like to the review the transcript. Ben took his copy and began to scan through, I sat quietly, waiting to take my lead. Ben began by steering our conversation toward the format of the transcription, he was <i>'pleasantly surprised'</i> to see his words documented in this way; commenting on the high level of accuracy of his <i>'reflective script'</i>. He made the transcript feel fresh and alive, exclaiming; <i>'I've never actually seen my words written down like this, it's strange seeing my voice on paper!'</i> We talked about how many words are spoken, but how often are they are gathered to be seen again? Words disappear in the air or remain as sound bites in our heads, fuelling an internal, emotionally driven dialogue. Ben reflected what a <i>'personal experience'</i> it was to see his words in this medium and attention turned to issues of privacy and dignity, leading us to the ethical aspects of research; removing all mention of his name, employer and work location. For me, this action gave the <i>'participant information'</i> authenticity in my research.</p> <p>Our exchange shifted to how the interview provided an unusual opportunity for in-depth reflection. He commented how quickly things alter, but his thoughts and ideas about his learning experience were easily accessible. When asked why, he said, <i>'because it was important to me'</i>. I stopped in my thinking tracks – how eloquently simple; how powerful the response. Ben remarked how some thoughts are <i>'deposited into the back of your mind'</i>, appearing when needed, hiding the rest of the time. His meta cognition revealing concealed gems needing space to be found.</p> <p>I fed back my observation of his attention to detail, he said he wanted to make sure he had given me all he could for my analysis. Ben unexpectedly turned the focus to me and to my research, so subtly that I almost missed the gesture. I enquired if Ben realised that we had moved from him talking about his experience to my research. "Yes" he said, <i>"my experience is part of your research"</i>. Suddenly, the double hermeneutic dawned on me. As Ben attempts to understand his experience,</p>

Name	Extract from field notes
	<p>I am trying to understand his understanding; 'cogs' in the same process, reminding me that, 'Coexistence must be in each case lived by each person' (Merleau-Ponty, 2013, p. 373). Ben signed the transcripts, shook my hand and our sharing encounter ended, replaced with my new interpretative relationship with his words.</p>
Adam	<p>Since our telephone interview, Adam became a dad again, experienced ill-health and changed jobs. Life had moved on, but he kept in contact. We met at a cafe on the city outskirts, 6 months after his interview. Waiting outside, Adam recognises me, before I recognised him. Adam greeted me with; <i>'how are you, how's the research?'</i> Adam's concern threw me. Sitting down, I reflected this back and he replied how taking part in the research had been <i>'fascinating'</i>; the telephone interview refreshing his knowledge and assisting him to think about his career, saying; <i>'you never get time to talk about learning in practice'</i>.</p> <p>Putting the transcripts on the table, Adam enquired; <i>'Is that mine, can I have a look?'</i> and we spoke of the aim of the meeting. Adam wanted to read one transcript each. He easily filled in the blanks and corrected minor typographical mistakes; <i>'I know this was six months, but it was like we did this yesterday. I remember the conversation so well, isn't that strange after all that's happened?'</i> I asked Adam why, he said; <i>'at the time I wasn't having conversations like this...I'm not sure I've ever had a conversation like this in practice'</i>. He told me being a practitioner was all about other people, solving immediate problems, firefighting; <i>'you don't talk about yourself or what's going on with you to anyone'</i>.</p> <p>On seeing his words on the pages, Adam remarked; <i>'I didn't know I talked like that'</i>, specifying phrases and patterns. Adam recalled the course as <i>'influential'</i> for knowledge development and his appreciation of someone else being <i>'professionally interested'</i> in him; <i>'my tutors, apart from one, wanted to help me, not just me as a student, me as Adam'</i>. Pausing, he added; <i>'I suppose that's what I want for my patients...to feel like somebody's interested in them as a person, I guess it's what we all want: to feel valued'</i>. The idea of feeling valued, fleeting as Adam made the next to correction his transcript. Asking him to go back and explain, he looked puzzled, stating; <i>'it's not rocket science!'</i> We discuss overlooking the obvious.</p> <p>Continuing to talk about <i>'feeling valued'</i>, Adam reported how <i>'little things'</i> helped <i>'enormously'</i>; giving an example of tutor promptness as seemingly respecting his shortness of dedicated study time, <i>'if I needed help, I needed it at the time I could use it'</i>. He told how his tutors, generally understood his work context, recalling the flexibility of the course was more about tutor flexibility. Adam believed the success of distance learning is founded on a willingness to participate stating; <i>'once you realise you are responsible for your own learning, somehow things get easier, and that has stayed with me'</i>. To clarify, Adam said; <i>'I now have confidence there may not be an answer, before doing the course I was pretty concrete: now I realise that there may be options or possibilities but not definitive answers and, that's okay'</i>.</p> <p>Removing no content from the transcript and signing both copies (and my notes), Adam thanked me; <i>'it has been a really useful experience Sally, I'm grateful to have been part of the course and your research'</i>. I found his gratitude almost overwhelming as he was helping me. Adam asked me to keep him updated.</p>

Table 8: Reflexive appraisal post-verification meetings, extracts taken from field notes

Section Summary

Putting my method in motion and finding the guides, resulted in me discovering a complex interplay between IPA ideology, ethical consideration and practical issues; each informing one another. To illustrate the discussion further, the final part of this chapter leads me to position the method I have used and my reflexive stance in the (double) hermeneutic. This is because IPA data collection demanded consistent awareness of my researcher presence, necessitating reflexivity for all decisions, making me more knowledgeable and critically able to converse with my 'researcher self', as confirmed by Dilley,

Interviews should allow us to investigate, in critical ways, our respondents' comprehensions of their experiences and beliefs as well as our own. (2004, p. 128)

For me, reflexivity is now an active conversation between my past and my present self, unwrapping questions to firstly recognise, then progress my 'taken-for-granted' appraisals.

Part IV: Position of Method in the (Double) Hermeneutic

In this section, I demonstrate why Smith (2004, p.40) signals the 'double hermeneutic' as a two-fold, sense-making method, uniting the phases of research design and data collection with analysis. Whilst initially seemingly separate activities, each is integral to the other. IPA combines the elements of descriptive and interpretive phenomenology, aiding the advancement of an 'inter-subjective understanding' (Standing, 2009, p. 30). In this way, IPA is a singular approach, fusing differing phenomenological stances with hermeneutics. Meanwhile, the description-interpretation debate discusses the emergence of themes via descriptive narratives 'bearing witness' to an identified experience (Barbour, 2008, p. 15). Yet, allying views neglect the researcher's dynamic role in the analytical process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Potentially, removing the researcher's active involvement in the analysis may not 'bring into the light' the deep, rich meanings phenomenology strives for (Pringle *et al.*, 2011, p. 8). So, like other phenomenological approaches, IPA accepts the participant's narrative, albeit with a sense of inquisitiveness as exemplified in the next three chapters. Here again, IPA takes a different view of the 'interpretation of suspicion' (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p. 201) or the critical analysis asserted by Langdridge (2007). Nonetheless, hermeneutic understanding is significant in IPA, as long as the degree of 'questioning' (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p. 36) remains close to the data. Implications derived from IPA research are transparently rooted in the participants' words, with direct quotes substantiating insights.

Hermeneutic Awareness

The premise of the hermeneutic circle connects the parts to the whole, and the whole to the parts (Smith, 2015). Heidegger's (2010) use of the 'hermeneutic circle', is a means of remaining sensitively attached to the phenomenon by burrowing down into the phenomenon to sharpen understanding, as opposed to broadening it (Holloway, 2005). For Smith (2007), a dynamic relationship is required between the parts, because neither part nor whole can be separately understood. Diagram 5 indicates how hermeneutic awareness transfers from data gathering to analysis and interpretation;

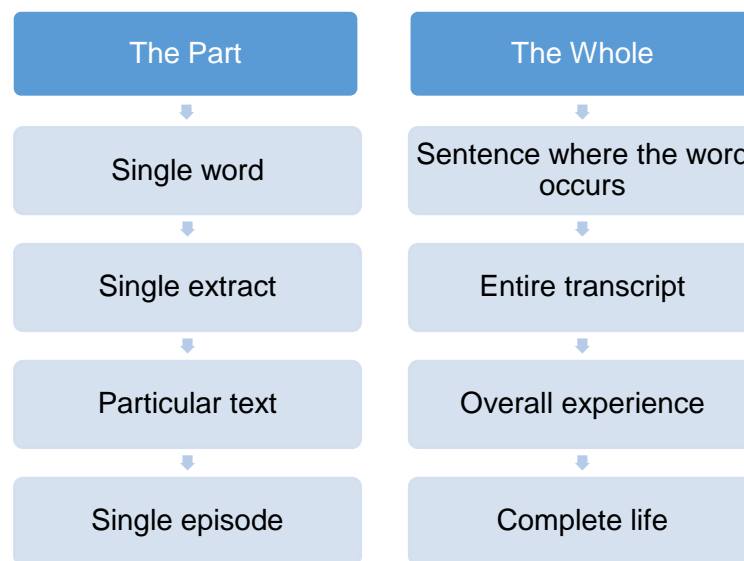


Diagram 5: Application of hermeneutic awareness, adapted from Smith (2007, p. 5)

Drawing on Heidegger's work, van Manen (1997, p. 131) maintains phenomenological research demands a dialectical ebb and flow for the duration of questioning, classifying a tripartite process of re-thinking, re-reflecting, and re-recognising. As an IPA researcher, the 'double hermeneutic' is essential to my data collection method, and also to the six steps of data analysis (Holloway, 2005; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Using Gadamer's (2013) proposition of the hermeneutic circle as happening linguistically and not only in text, revisiting the participants' spoken words recursively, reflecting on what was said, plus revising possible meanings, activates the double hermeneutic. Through conversing with others and myself, their words were explored and new understandings discovered, inspiring the participants as partners in my study, as opposed to merely providers of data (Finlay, 2011).

Fleming *et al.*, (2003) conclude that to experience the hermeneutic circle, in-depth discussion is needed between the researcher and the researched. Extending this, Smith (2007, p. 6) calls for 'an intense attentiveness to and engagement with, the participant as he/she speaks' for the double hermeneutic to be comprehended. However, Hammond (2010) is critical of Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) for their lack of clarity of how the hermeneutic circle is explicitly connected to, and used in IPA. The inquisitive nature of the IPA interview (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) promotes the co-construction of knowledge and not, as claimed by Hammond (2010), resulting in narratives comprising of solely participants' meaning making.

The double hermeneutic conceptually describes the process of the participants making-sense, whilst the researcher is sense-making, practical application is apparent in my in-depth interviews. In action, the hermeneutic circle is cognitively taxing, time consuming, and entails high-levels of concentration (discussion is found in Chapter 6). I encouraged each participant to story-tell, pondering the meanings derived from their experience. Avoiding assumptions, I repeatedly sought clarification, using phrases such as 'tell me more', to tease out meaning. Funnelling questions moved beyond description to ascertain, in detail, what the experience was like. Checking back on my understanding re-affirmed my commitment to convey each of their stories in the way it was provided (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009; Finlay, 2011). Significantly for the IPA researcher, interviewing skills overtly tie theoretical knowledge and tangible application together.

My Observations of the Research Design

Quality is essential to IPA research (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009), although it is not appropriate to use the same criteria applied to quantitative research (Finlay, 2006). Illustration of the 'workings' of the research process and justifications of the researcher's position mediate the challenges of establishing qualitative research rigour. Generally criticised as lacking rigour, Groth (2010) and Bryman (2012) suggest qualitative research is associated with issues of anecdotal-source, bias, purposive sampling, and project scale. Yet, Sarma (2015) observes limitations as opinions and not cited to specific scholarly work. Alternatively, Smith's (2011) review of 294 pieces of published IPA research specifically critiques crude analysis, lacking in nuance, with insufficient extracts from participants' supporting themes, along with poor researcher visibility. I was therefore acutely aware that my IPA research activities and insights must be described and defended in clear, straightforward language.

When IPA research is carried out in accordance with the principles of rigour (Finlay, 2006), the in-depth accounts of experiences in the social world can give insights, less accessible to other quantitative approaches (Pringle *et al.*, 2011) because of the transparent integration of phenomenological thinking, extending and supporting insights. Staying mindful of how claims are backed by convincing evidence is a primary quality measure, I took great care to ensure the insights generating from this study are observable. Therefore, I used an ongoing reflexive process to identify, examine and own my subjective experiences in light of the data, as Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) contend observable reflexivity is a critical component of the iterative process of IPA research. Issues of rigour emerge because according to West, 'all research is to an extent, autobiographical' (2012, p. 17).

Acknowledging my autobiographical presence is central to the adoption of a phenomenological attitude and participation in Finlay's (2003) 'hermeneutic reflection'. Reflexive recognition of my assumptions enabled me to evaluate my presence in the phenomenon being studied (Willig, 2008), ensuring that the data remained the focus in this study. My close attention to the design and method of my research responds to Smith, Flowers and Larkin's (2009) reminder to IPA reviewers to be conscious of i) commitment to the idiographic approach, ii) attention given to the significance of the experiential narratives for participant(s), iii) interpretative and hermeneutic scrutiny, and iv) carefulness within generalised assertions. The method I employed indicates Finlay's (2013) assertion for quality judgements with facets of reasoning and action demonstrated in my transparent decision-making and systematic processes, grounded by ethical integrity (Haverkamp, 2005; Roberts 2010; Hammersley & Traianou 2012).

More specifically, Yardley's (2008) 'four principles' summarised below were implemented in my method and throughout my research, addressing concerns in Smith's (2011) review of quality in published IPA research;

- *Sensitivity to context and credibility* is promoted through the transparent development of my research question and methodological rationale to establish a detailed account rather than a broad reconnaissance. My ethically-orientated method forms a firm foundation for gathering high quality data.
- *Commitment to rigour* is recognised in confirming my audit trail, from proposal to final report, specifically connecting raw data and notes to themes, including ethical application and confirmation, research proposal, interview schedule, anonymised audio recordings, annotated and signed transcripts, field notes, supervisory records, tabulated themes and, final report.

- *Transparency and coherence* are evident in my method because my decision-making has fidelity to the theory and process of IPA, explicitly i) my commitment to the idiographic approach, ensuring sufficient and balanced sampling, ii) my carefulness in eliciting meanings contained in the experiential narratives gifted, and iii) my use of (reflexive) hermeneutic scrutiny (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).
- *Impact and importance* are identifiable as my method is presented with ample, nuanced content, permitting others to follow and evaluate my decision-making (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013b).

Chapter Summary

The research design and method is described, discussed and justified for my qualitative, exploratory study of the lived experience of distance learning using the lens of IPA. My decision-making is coloured by the key areas of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. The research design and method selected is evidently phenomenological, as the experience of distance learning is uniquely shared via descriptive detail and interpretative clues, during the interview and at the verification meeting. I used Yardley's (2015) proposition for the co-construction of meaning to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, illustrating how issues of rigour synthesise with quality and reflexivity throughout my IPA research. In Chapter 5, my treatment of the data is presented through the six steps of IPA analysis in order to construct my interpretations in Chapter 7.

Chapter 5: Data Analysis – The Evolving Vista

Introduction – The strategy

The data analysis stage was consistent with Denzin and Lincoln's (2013a) *Phase 5: The Art and Politics of Interpretation and Evaluation of Qualitative Research*. In qualitative research, there is no single route offered for data analysis, however as detailed in Chapter 4, IPA uses a series of six steps (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) to access the complexities of the data.

Step	Process
1	Read and re-read transcript to get to know the data
2	Make initial notes to systematically capture observations
3	Develop emerging (prototype) themes for each case
4	Search for connections across emergent themes for each case
5	Move to the next case
6	Look for patterns across cases

Table 9: IPA six-step analysis (original)

Whilst not prescriptive, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) recommend researchers take a willing and thoughtful journey through each Step, uncovering layer upon layer of understanding. Data analysis in IPA is a way of reflexively and respectfully identifying with what has been said rather than purely an action of the research process or as Merleau-Ponty states, '*Phenomenology can be practised and identified as a manner and a style of thinking*' (2013, p. 8 [emphasis in original]). This point of view replicates the approach taken toward the research design and data collection, reinforcing Finlay's (2011, p. 23) adoption of a 'phenomenological attitude'. As a researcher, I needed to stop and dwell in the spaces created by the data to see and experience what was there. Using the principles of the hermeneutic cycle given in Chapter 3, my attention was directed toward the participants' efforts to define and understand the phenomenon, the motion of analysis traversing the individual to the collective, from superficial description to deeper interpretation (Smith, 2015).

Organisation of the Data

Using reflexive awareness of impressions formed through the data collection phase, I chose to sequence the individual case analysis in the order of the transcript review meetings as opposed to initial interviews (i.e. Dora, Cate, Ben, Adam). The IPA process has a commitment

to idiography, meaning each participant narrative must be preserved in its own right before contrast and comparison can be made. Consequently, analysis of the first case established an experiential template for subsequent analytical activity (Smith, 2015) ensuring the same treatment for each analysis whilst keeping a clear chronicle of the individual voice. And so, I analysed each transcript separately (Steps 1 to 4) before combining the data (Step 6) where the distinct features of each account were balanced against commonalities in the cohort.

From the outset of the analysis phase, both I as a researcher, and the research audience must be aware that the IPA research process is not designed to provide an objective or absolute report of a phenomenon. A more accurate intention is to produce a multi-layered, vivid and eloquent representation of the participant's narrative (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Understanding is influenced by the temporal context (Smith, 2007) and extended via the researcher's 'biographical presence' (Smith, 2004, p. 45). The starting level is descriptive, conveying an empathetic understanding and progresses to a critical analysis formed by the researcher's interpretative work (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2008; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Dual level hermeneutic appraisal reaffirms Finlay's (2012) call for a post-postmodern milieu, where she challenges researchers to observe that, 'knowledge produced is contingent, proportional, emergent and subject to alternative interpretations' (2012, p. 32). My analysis captures my understanding at a defined point in time, and is not absolute.

Reading and Writing for Phenomenological Descriptions and Interpretative Insights

As an IPA researcher, I moved gradually and systematically into the data; reading and careful re-reading to cultivate reflexive associations; returning to the transcripts many times, with each visit encouraging deeper access by seeking and finding nuances, confirmations and incongruities. By listening to the audio recordings again, both with and without the transcript, I was immersed further in the data, filling my analytic space with sight and sound. Simultaneously reading and hearing the data, developed my ability to be present in the analytic task as I recalled the atmosphere of the interview to ground my thinking in the *lebenswelt* (lifeworld) of the participants (Heidegger, 2011). For example, Dora's busyness is captured through the interruptions from others, and Ben's family context can be heard in the background sounds from his son. More of these reflexive observations are found in Chapter 6.

My realisations strengthened as I noticed how each participant's words held overt and covert significances, both what was said and what was not said formed data to be interpreted. My internal dialogue became a blend of insights, inquisitiveness and uncertainty. Capturing these

branches of thought, I placed initial notes directly onto the transcript. van Manen (2006) determines that, 'The assumption that needs to be examined is that qualitative (phenomenological) inquiry cannot really be separated from the practice of writing' (2006, p. 713). Thus, my note writing is an observable act, converting from my inner world thinking to external expression, including the participants' descriptions, recurring phrases, metaphors and, emotional cues. Plus, notes were employed as document markers and recorded in the right-hand margin, staying with the participants' words (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

My proximity to what had been said, spurred an empathetic understanding of the participants' making-sense whilst simultaneously being mindful of my own sense-making. As a researcher, I alternate between *emic* and *etic* perspectives. Merriam (2009) explains the *emic* perspective signifies internal, culturally-given vocabulary and meanings, and the *etic* perspective takes an external position on culture, language, connotation and social happenings. The former observes the phenomenological attitude, guarding against psychological reductionism or distancing from the data, and the latter applies to the psychological concepts and theories shedding new light on the research question. For example, an *emic* perspective is shown in Dora's comment '*I'm not academic*' whereas the *etic* perspective on her comment is that Dora protects herself from the discomfort of academic challenge by removing herself from what she perceives as academic. The 'outsider perspective' releases opportunities to advance theories and insights which may be inaccessible to the participant themselves. Others might then be able to consider their own situations and contexts, as opposed to transporting theories from a single setting to explain phenomena in a different one (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013b).

Field Notes

Engagement with IPA fosters an understanding that the 'basic datum of phenomenology is the conscious human being' (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 98). Reflexively contemplating my own opinions and beliefs works to ensure that my own preconceptions or predispositions do not prematurely categorise or unknowingly influence the data. Field notes established before the data collection phase, continued as an auditable exercise throughout the research process. Journaling at each phase and step conveyed my thoughts and observations, mediating personal and intellectual absorption. Table 10 contains extracts from my field notes with specific reference to four aspects.

Field note extracts	Reflexive examples from field notes			
	ADAM	BEN	CATE	DORA
Observational, illustrating points of significance during interviews	There is no background noise, Adam has closed the world around him to give his full attention to me.	Ben's tone is calm and deliberate, he wants me to hear and understand what he is saying.	I have interrupted the present for Cate, she is rapidly trying to collect and sort her thoughts of the past.	Nothing is predictable in Dora's world. Her efforts thwarted by the demands around her, to which she must respond.
Theoretical (reflections), linking my interview experience with my ideas	As our conversation progressed I sensed the gap between the unknown and known reducing.	Whilst Ben talked of his learning experience, others are always close by. Ben was not alone in his learning experience.	I had not appreciated Cate's skills in identifying, managing, and meeting her own learning needs. She is expert on herself.	Dora has a pragmatic and self-surprising view of her new relationship with learning and what this means to her.
Methodological, my critique of the research process,	The difference between descriptions and deep descriptions centred on the connections between thoughts, feelings and actions.	Picking up specific experiences is tricky because the experience of learning is now so embedded in Ben's lifeworld experience.	Patience is needed to allow the words to tell the story. Stories unfold and every word is important.	Dora's experiences happen, they are not abstract or conceptual. She used her words to bring me closer to her 'whole' experience.
Analytical, questioning my thinking	What does Adam's experience say about the role of the distance-learning tutor and the relationship between tutor and learner?	Ben's mistakes helped him to learn. How does the process of making and rectifying mistakes improve autonomy for distance learners?	Cate's story was not easy to tell at first, why did she so intently persevere? Why was this story needing to be told and why was this the time to tell?	Had I rescheduled Dora's interview, would this unique insight have been achieved? Would there have been a better time, and better for what?

Table 10: Reflexive examples from field notes (Wolfinger, 2002)

The IPA method for data analysis and interpretations described in Chapter 7 is a rolling, refining process, and not an isolated event or task. Writing gathers and records thoughts, progressing from observation and immediate appraisal through to complex insights that take shape as the researcher's eyes adjust to the brightest and shadiest corners of the data. As van Manen suggests,

The writing of work involves textual material that possesses hermeneutic and interpretive significance. It is precisely in the process of writing that the data of the research are gained as well as interpreted and that the fundamental nature of the research questions is perceived. (2006, p. 715)

My extensive notes, kept throughout this research enabled me to clarify thinking, signpost observations and make links between description, interpretation and theory. Writing allows 'the self' to be present as my thoughts are captured on the page, heightening reflexive awareness. In this sense, writing is a tangible example of the double hermeneutic advocated by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) for IPA research.

Section Summary

The 'gift of data' (Holloway, 2005, p. 29) offers potential insights into defined phenomena that have previously not found attention. I worked carefully, candidly and judiciously with the uniqueness of the data set. This process presents me as the researcher with 'a place of vision, wonder, struggle, tolerance and determination' (extract from my field notes). Looking closely at other people involves rigorous examination of who we are in terms of our own identities and relationship with the world (Heidegger, 2011). Reflexive contemplation was necessary and deliberate in maintaining fidelity to IPA.

Steps 1 and 2: First Glimpses – Early forays into the landscape

The analysis of the transcriptions commenced with data immersion (Step 1: Read and re-read transcript to get to know the data) (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). To begin this iterative process, I used the left-hand margin of the 'working copy' transcript, which had been reprinted to include double spacing and margins at either side of the text, to transpose word-for-word the comments made by the participants at the transcript review meetings. The next stage consisted of reading and re-reading the transcript on a number of occasions, interspersed with listening and re-listening to the audio recordings. The timbre of the experience became more familiar with each visit. I heard the melody of the words and phrases as familiar chords through repetitions, emphasis and hesitancy – the assuredness of some statements contrasted to the trailing-off of other sentences. The pace and tone accented specific and sometimes obscured features. The 'parts' threaded their way into the 'whole', as the story developed word-by-word, line-by-line. I patiently accepted that the data would reveal, transform and reshape patterns, providing insight into the participant experience.

In Step 1, I slowed down to hone in on, and dwell in the 'phenomenon' (Finlay, 2011), taking the opportunity to identify and accentuate the explicit qualities of the lived experience, often missed as we zoom along the familiar routes of everyday life. Attuning myself, I 'put the brakes

on', gradually slowing down until I could be still and see what was in and 'between' the lines of text. I realised Steps 1 and 2 were enmeshed as my familiarity with the transcript grew.

Progression to Step 2 (make initial notes to systematically capture observations) was signalled by the need to start noting observations and thoughts directly onto the transcript. Unlike other qualitative research methodologies, IPA exposes coding to be a process of noting or commenting, brief statements rather than succinct codes. The term 'notes' is used in IPA to describe preliminary, tentative themes. There is no set guidance or rules regarding what must be elicited or commented on, so as a guide, I incorporated suggestions from Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009). For instance I placed my notes in the right hand margin indicating firstly descriptive, then linguistic and finally conceptual observations.

Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) call upon researchers to attempt to shelve presuppositions and judgements on what is directly offered in the transcript data. I was reminded of the hermeneutic phenomenological paradigmatic formations of the IPA process. The unravelling of connections binding analysis to my fore-structured understanding demanded re-appraisal of Husserlian bracketing (LeVasseur, 2003). Heidegger's (2010) multifarious and dynamic scope of fore-structures provoked my understanding of bracketing to be a cyclical, reflexive process of self-questioning while questioning the data (Finlay & Gough, 2003). Bracketing served as a function to raise consciousness, holding my sense-making to concentrate on how each participant made sense of the phenomena. Giorgi's (2011) criticism of IPA for having no explicit implementation for bracketing stems from a lack of direct instruction on this in IPA. Bracketing is self-finding, relating to how and where I place myself as the researcher in the data. It is not a binary 'in/out' decision but deliberate researcher awareness of which issues and experiences belong to the participants and which issues and experiences remain theirs. As Merleau-Ponty points out,

In the experience of dialogue, a common ground is constituted between me and another; my thought and his forms a single fabric, my words and those of my interlocutor are called forth by the state of the discussion and are inserted into a shared operation of which neither of us is creator. (2013, p. 370)

The surfacing of questions about my relationship to the data, signified the progression from observation to interpretation and indicated the need to move to Step 3 (Develop emerging (prototype) themes for each case). The interpretive frame reduces the divide between researcher and participant as the analysis proceeds. This aspect of IPA research involves the researcher reflexively recording the nature and source of emergent interpretations.

Noting

Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) do not advocate the following three areas for noting as prescriptive or totally inclusive, but they did provide a set of useful and consistent analytic tools. Ensuring that my notes were legible, clearly labelled and embedded in the participant's words, safeguarded the phenomenological anchoring of the participants' 'descriptive core of comments' (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p. 85) in the final account.

Descriptive notes

This preliminary level of analysis focused on the dialogue at 'face value', attending to the lived, individualised experiences and meanings of participants. Features to be identified, include things of significance and included 'sound bites', 'assumptions', and idiosyncrasies within their spoken word and emotional cues. My observations of descriptive pointers began with simple terms like Dora's '*connection with others*'. Through deepening my analysis, the descriptions created richer meaning to these initial objects. For example, '*reliability of tutor*' became 'Dora cares for others, now she felt cared for by her tutor, she was affectively close to support, boosting her own development'.

Linguistic notes

Linguistic notes highlighted how participants used language to express meaning. I located connections and junctures evident in the participants' use of pronouns, humour, repetition and fluidity within articulation (i.e. hesitation, pauses, and cues indicating that part of the dialogue had ended or needed a prompt). The use of metaphors was also highlighted since as Smith, Flowers and Larkin contend, metaphors are 'a particularly powerful component of analysis' (2009, p. 88) due to the linguistic functionality of attaching description to conceptual reasoning. Examples included Ben's repetition of the word '*consolidated*' when describing the relationship of his new knowledge to his job role. Similarly, Adam's metaphorical use of a '*key*' to describe the function of an online tutor to open the opportunity for learning, and Cate's lack of narrative flow at the start of her interview as she battled to turn attention from present day concerns to a more reflective mode.

Conceptual notes

The third wave of annotation was Conceptual noting, which was more interpretative in nature as the data was viewed from a conjectural perspective. Noting here offered a place for initial interpretations and questions from my perspective as researcher whilst remaining close to the participant's lifeworld experience. These notes were interrogative and not possible during the

previous stages because until this point a comprehensive picture of the 'whole' contained within the transcript data was unavailable. I pinpointed aspects of the participant's description which led to additional questions. I realised that some of my questions could not take me further (for example, did Dora's manager take her wish to develop seriously?), and others opened up new possibilities within my analysis (e.g. why did Cate get confused when describing the modules on her course? Why was Dora not able to ask for help directly? Why did Ben not tell his brother about being on the course? How did Adam keep his motivation?). The most important questions directed me back to the data, inducing reappraisal of the data. I also included free association insights; an activity likened to 'free text analysis' (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p. 83) taking my thinking to a more creative realm.

This part of the analysis prompted a shift from the participant's actual words and specific description toward an overall understanding of the concerns presented. It was essential to overtly express my researcher reflexivity and refine my understanding. Indeed, the development from 'loosely immersed' in the narrative to 'close scrutiny' resulted from a combination of familiarity and confidence. I used Smith, Flowers and Larkin's (2009, p. 90) strategy of deconstruction to 'sense check' my initial noting. Reading the transcripts again, paragraph-by-paragraph backwards provided a new perspective, illuminating words and possible meanings through de-contextualisation. With the narrative flow removed, I concentrated on what was 'there' rather than what my mind was putting in front of me. This task matured my impressions, the significant structures became evident in more subtle forms and textual intricacies (e.g. Dora's indirect repetitions and intricate use of therapeutic strategy for active listening which I had initially missed).

Navigating the Initial Data Analysis

The set of comprehensive handwritten notes and comments were typed into NVivo (i.e. computer software for qualitative data analysis). This provided a secure and consistent manner of data management and retrieval, strengthening the process of individual and cross case analysis. My choice to use a Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS) worked with the potential quantity, complexity and density of data (Arthur *et al.*, 2012). Bazeley (2013) argues that contemporary software design takes into account the need for near and more distant vantage points to appreciate the data fully. Consequently, CAQDAS is a tool and does not displace the interpretive nature of analysis, instead it supports effective data storage with efficient and accurate checking functions. Indeed, Gibbs (2012) approves of CAQDAS for IPA because concerns of 'distancing' is mediated by the closeness of access.

Step 3: Initial Impressions – Capturing the scene

Steps 2 and 3 were bridged by securing my understanding through a written ‘contour sketch’ using the notes elicited. The ‘contour sketch’ provided a narrative place to collect my thoughts about the features of participants’ experiential terrain and critically bond with my phenomenological understanding of the philosophers who shaped IPA: Heidegger, Gadamer, and Merleau-Ponty. I travelled back and forth through the data gaining content, detail and context. What began as a narrow stream of words, brief statements and a few nebulous queries soon became a flood of comments and reflective questions. The more intimately the approach was adhered to, the easier and deeper the reflexive process became (Finlay, 2011). My attention moved toward gathering deeper abstract concepts which enabled me to begin to make sense of the trends of meaning contained within the data. Smythe *et al.* propose that; ‘Writing brings the unsaid into the open space where ideas are exposed to interpretative gaze, to wonder, and to ask still more questions’ (2008, p. 1395). The result was four unique text-based outlines of shapes formed by the participants’ words. For each participant, I have used **bold** type to indicate my notes, and *italics* for direct participant quotes.

Step 3a: Summary of Contour Sketches from Initial Notes

DORA

Summary of Notes for Dora (in alphabetical order) for Step 3a
(Clinical) currency, using contemporary reasoning
Confirmation of achievements from others
Connections with others to validate learning
Course based challenge
Curiosity about the once unquestioned
Finding something lost
Life outside the course, things don’t stop because of study
Meaning for me
Personal meaning
Positive sense of self
Strategies for learning
Self-acquired curriculum
Taking control of self-development
Time demands from others

Table 11: Summary of notes for Dora (in alphabetical order) for Step 3a

Dora's world was complicated, she constantly gave to others, entangled by 'busyness'. The pace of Dora's dialogue made me follow where she led. I asked questions but Dora managed the route. This was her journey and I was a willing and welcomed travelling companion. I had to keep up, she had no time or space for a passive passenger. However, to capture the nuanced facets of Dora's narrative, I purposefully slowed the analysis down, closely observing the definite and the hesitant, the vibrant description and the misty trailing off sentences.

I gathered a series of 'happenings', defined events that had 'happened' in the context of her lifeworld. The 'present to mind' content of her responses surfacing with little persuasion, thoughts previously lacking verbalisation, void of opportunity, arrived together collectively. When asked if the conversation had raised anything unexpected, Dora replied: *'No, no, no well, all of it really because it's not like I planned what I was going to say. I didn't know what I was going to say'*, the initial, *'No, no, no well...'* indicating the accessibility of Dora's thoughts once she had the space. Phenomena are instinctively part of our embeddedness, interpretation, and understanding is not how the world is known, but who we are (Heidegger, 2010). We bounced between the past of Dora's course experience when she said, *'When I think back to the course'*, and the present with comments typified by, *'I've got an itch'*. Past and present so closely joined that I had to carefully track the temporal frame. Dora recognised this too when she noticed that, *'a lot of this intermingles'* and explains something about Dora's lifeworld, which is not a place of 'separate events' but a hectic amalgamation of 'happenings'.

Dora's 'happenings' inhabit the moment, a necessity for the dynamic environment of her work situation, where conflicting and changing demands are unpredictable; she remarked that, *'running my ward is chaotic'*. Dora has to be responsive and reactive, and unaccustomed to looking back, in her words: *'Yeah, I can only see that now looking back'*. Her world is about managing the here and now rather than exploring the past or predicting the future. When asked about changes in herself, she replies, *'if I'm honest it wasn't until it was all over'*. Dora centres on the task in hand, noting that, *'I'm very good on day-to-day stuff'*.

For Dora, descriptions of time melded course descriptions with her life outside the course. This was particularly in evidence when she said, *'the last two modules was [sic] particularly hard personally'*. Her **personal meaning** was bound by her life events or 'happenings'. The things that happened to Dora were developmentally noteworthy as opposed to the specific course content. Her learning was inherent to her day-to-day experience and not through defined learning tasks set by others. In our conversation, I asked Dora to identify separate components of an integrated, self-composed learning experience.

To achieve this, Dora consistently checked what had been asked and repeated the question within the first line of her answer to refocus herself. This therapeutic technique (Egan, 2010) used in mental health practice (active listening), clarifies, adds closeness and abates conversation giving measure to her phrase, '*busy busy*'. Heidegger (2010) states *dasein* regularly becomes removed from itself as people are often 'far away' from themselves, and Sheenan (2014) sees *dasein* as an openness to and an opening of *Being*. Dora simultaneously had close observation and a bird's eye view of her world experience. She instinctively used habitual therapeutic skills to know more of her experience, making it hard to separate Dora from 'Nurse Dora', as Dora is most comfortable in the practice environment.

Reviewing her motivation for venturing into an uncomfortable and foreboding academic world, Dora reported that her clinical role required a degree level award but this was engulfed by her caring principles as noted in her response:

At the time I was thinking, oh what on earth I am doing, I'm 46, nearly 46 or I was just 46. Why am I doing this degree? Why am I bothering? Well because actually this is what you want to do. So when you break it down, I did want it, I wanted it desperately because I want to stay up to date and I want to be able to evidence, not just by sitting in a job for five-and-a-half years, is it expected that I have that knowledge? I want to be able to evidence that knowledge.

Dora's comments about being, '*not 'academic', and 'not from an academic family*' grounded her self-description and view of her professionalism. Professionalism (Evans, 2008) is a descriptor which combines status-related elements (those given by others) and role-based knowledge, skills and attitudes. Heidegger (2010) stresses how 'historicity' bestows understandings of the world generationally ingrained with all encounters orientated to an individual's background. Dora had given herself a label inextricably tied to her past: a way of perceiving herself in a familiar world. The label remains despite the degree achievement and her working toward a Master's level module. She said, '*The very fact that I managed to get through it is an achievement... because I've never considered myself academic*'. There was no dent in Dora's self-view, even when she recognised achievement in her comment, '*I did succeed*', '*to be nearly 47 and to achieve an honours degree*'. Dora had her own perspective of 'academic', reporting that she, '*was never at school, I hated school, I remember hating school with a vengeance*'. Her interpretation of 'academic' was filtered through an historic lens. For Dora, 'academic' meant exclusion, a view most noticeable in her comment that, '*they all have jargon*'. Jargon divides academia from Dora when she says, '*it's not clear to me*'. In this respect 'academic' is not inclusive or 'giving', and does not resonate with what Dora is, does and needs. Dora wants to be in her words, '*Honest, trustworthy... everything a human being should be*'.

Dora did not label her distance learning tutors as 'academics'. She asked, for example, *'what should I call you?'* when asked to describe them. Dora's idiosyncratic perspective did not translate to her observation that, *'Nothing was too much trouble. If there was something I needed I could phone up, speak to my tutor and they would find a way around it and point me in the right direction to what I needed to do'*. In the context of her distance learning experience, her tutors were interpreters of *'academic jargon'* (Dora's term). Gadamer (2013) stated that, *'Language is the universal medium in which understanding occurs. Understanding occurs in interpreting'* (2013, p. 407). The tutors 'gave' to Dora in a language and manner she could accept, contrasting her usual position of 'unconditional giver', she recalled, *'the nice thing for me was it didn't matter what the silliest question was, it wasn't silly in their perspective'*. The tutors were the ones giving unconditionally, or, as Escudero (2013) puts it, *'The other can only be allowed to speak if we allow ourselves to hear'* (2013, p. 306). Dora allowed herself to be supported, she relinquished her role of giver to become a receiver. This was not a passive exchange but one that was enabling and encouraging. She said, *'I could do it, I could achieve it, so hang in there and take all the support that was being thrown at me and that's what I did. That person set me up to achieve, no doubt'*. By describing the teacher as *'that person'*, Dora indicated that her tutors were not remote academics full of jargon but individuals, close-by and familiar, and, as Dora noted, *'There was just the connect because from day one they were positive, they were supportive'*.

Through her emerging view of her help-giving tutors, Dora developed a new relationship with learning **through finding something lost**. She noted that she had to, *'revisit stuff'*, which in her words, *'brought me back'*. Her career progression to the role of Sister, had taken her *'out of the loop'* (Dora's term) and she had focused on, *'on the shop floor nursing'*, or, in other words, direct patient contact. Reflecting on how her studies had moved her closer again to the reasons she entered her profession, Dora stated, *'I could have these conversations with my staff and when they were assessing a patient, put my point of view'*. She viewed this as, *'relearning'*, recognising that *'you lose a lot'*. Dora rediscovered internal connections to her present role and remarked that, *'Now, not only am I up-to-date with my knowledge, I'm up-to-date with my skills and I'm up-to-date in my role... to where I actually know my job inside out'*. She also gained external **connections with others** (staff and colleagues) and acknowledged that, *'I'm much more diplomatic in getting what I need to say across'*. **Connections** fuelling Dora's **curiosity**, increasing confidence via **(clinical) currency** and **positive sense of self**. She felt able to contribute meaningfully and productively as intimated by her observation that, *'I'm not sitting here telling somebody 'A', 'B' and 'C' because that's what I think, I can tell them because that's what I know and I can back it up with the knowledge'*. She 'tested out' her developing knowledge, and said, *'I didn't want to just research academically, do the piece of*

work but not incorporate in my day-to-day working because it wouldn't have meant anything', thereby fully integrating learning into routine practice and not as a distant adjunct but a unified experience. Halling (2009) argues that, 'Habitual patterns of perceiving and responding give way to a freshness of experience and to a deeply personal and spontaneous reaching out to the other' (2009, p. 24). The course opened a new dialogue for Dora, readjusting her experience of caring to include being 'cared for'. She disclosed, 'I could share the difficulties I was having, I was quite open and felt comfortable being open'.

Dora's learning insight in the course was parallel to her **life outside the course** which was an unrelenting whirl of caring; managing two wards and travelling to look after a much loved relative with a terminal illness who died during the latter part of her studies. She referred to, *'lots of tutorial support. I was very, very much supported in my need at the time to take a break'*. Indeed, some **course-based challenges** were in fact not what they initially appeared. Dora acknowledged that contacting tutors for passwords or access issues masked her reaching out for someone to be 'on her side', she acknowledged that,

Being a ward sister is a lonely place. I give and give and give. My tutor was the first person in my professional life to give me something back. I usually do all the caring and suddenly I found I was being cared for. It was a big thing for me and something that I can only really see now because at the time I was too close to everything that was going on for me. I never expected to feel cared for in an academic course.

Again, this exemplified how Dora's self-learning was a personal consequence of experience and not situated in academic course content. Without the interview, this unique insight would have been obscured by everydayness (Heidegger, 2010) and assumption. The intangible experience of receiving care was made possible for Dora via technology. The lack of face-to-face contact was no detriment to human-to-human contact, and in fact it delivered an unexpected emancipatory outcome.

The **more than content** learning had positive, affective qualities with unanticipated outcomes exclusive to Dora. Knowledge, attitudes and skills were linked when she said, *'I think that's all just about learning in general as well'*. For her, learning was about acquiring useful personalised **strategies**, such as, *'As long as I planned my day step-by-step'* and *'apply myself within the study day'*. Both of these examples show Dora taking control of her learning rather than staying within her passive frame of being, *'not academic'* (Dora's term). At the end of the interview, Dora showed her active approach by mentioning, *'It's not like I planned what I was going to say. So it will give me food for thought'*. Dora is her own learning resource; she continues to learn for and from herself. Gadamer (2013) assumed understanding and

interpretation as joined and evolving together, so definitive interpretation is unachievable. Dora's 'learning' moves on as her temporal frame shifts. **Time**, once a frustrating barrier to learning, is now the facilitator. The pressure of imposed deadlines are removed and have been replaced with a set of 'happenings' anchoring future re-appraisals.

Sub-Step 3b: Temporal (Lived Time) Echoes – Linking lanes and separating slopes

The slow and deliberate process of transposing notes from Steps 2 and 3 onto NVivo, combined with my contour sketches, provoked a deeper interpretative web of annotation. Whilst consciously maintaining fidelity to the methodology, I discovered the need to enhance Step 3. The addition of a sub-step, is in keeping with the dynamic interchange between research and researcher in IPA work. Recognising that IPA is not a 'prescriptive methodology' (Smith, 2015, p. 39), I determined my own route for analysis, principally guided by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009). Therefore, Sub-Step 3b is a reflexivity encountered methodological extension (see Table 12) situated as discrete, yet integral part of the 6 steps of IPA analysis and forms an original contribution to research practice.

Step	Process
1	Read and re-read transcript to get to know the data
2	Make initial notes to systematically capture observations
3	Develop emerging (prototype) themes for each case
3b	Attending to the reflexive echoes
4	Search for connections across emergent themes for each case
5	Move to the next case
6	Look for patterns across cases

Table 12: IPA 6 step analysis (amended)

When reviewing Dora's notes, I became aware of the resonance between Dora's narrative and my own. Recognising this as having significance for the phenomenological processes of data analysis and interpretation, I deliberately halted the analysis, stopping to identify the 'echoes' I could hear. In choosing the term echoes to describe this methodological extension, I reveal how close and outlying insights from the participant's narratives influence my reflexive understanding. Essentially, echoes are triggered by something, in the case of my study, the 'something' is the participant's words, ricocheting around my own experience. At times the echoes felt far off, distant sounds only recognisable when deep in thought. However, I found instances of closeness to the origin of the sound, for example, the booming clangs of Dora's

busy world burst into my thinking, taking me back to my former clinical world whilst simultaneously transporting me to the present.

In my first experience of IPA data analysis, noticing the ‘echoes’ between Dora’s world and my own, helped me to appreciate more clearly Merleau-Ponty’s (2013) declaration that, ‘man is simultaneously subject and object, first and third person, absolutely free and yet dependent’ (2013, p. 146). Recognition of the similarities and differences of experience, encouraged me to move onward with empathetic openness (Finlay, 2012), willing to reflexively hear, view and understand more about data. I then actively incorporated the insight of ‘echoes’ in the next three case analyses. The phenomenological interpretation progressing because of the flexibility in my heightened interpretative awareness. My own assumptions were teased out to discover meaning as I respectfully and sensitively travelled further into the data given by others. Taylor (1985, p. 75) considered individuals as ‘self-interpreting’, referring to dynamic attempts to understand events, things, and others in their lives. The lifeworld of others drew out hidden thinking about my own place and being within the research. I noticed myself to be simultaneously separate from the participants, and connected because the dataset grew by interlinking the participants’ words with my ideas. Discussion of my reflexive echoes is extended in Chapter 6.

CATE

Summary of Notes for Cate (in alphabetical order) for Step 3a
Academic Vulnerability
Applying Learning to real life examples
Commitment to own goal
Confidence in self
Feeling Valued by others
Interest beyond face-value appraisals , permission to look deeper and further
Learner–Tutor Relationship
Managing home, work and study
More than content learning
Organisational aspects of the course to promote learning and care
Personal Meaning from learning experiences
Acknowledgement of Self-Achievement
Self-directed goal
Strategies to learn how to learn for life
Support for own ambitions
Use of Time

Table 13: Summary of notes for Cate (in alphabetical order) for Step 3a

Cate described herself as an 'intuitive person', where intuition operates in the moment. The subject of our dialogue was in the past, with immediacy replaced by reminiscence. Cate's initial muddle of words was her metaphorically sorting through her thoughts. She was picking up and putting down what may or may not be useful in trying to 'get back' to this defined period in her life context. As her thoughts unravelled, the dialogue became less pressured and more content rich. Gadamer suggests that,

conversation has a spirit of its own, and that the language in which it is conducted bears its own truth within it – i.e. that it allows something to 'emerge' which henceforth exists. (2013, p. 402)

Patience was needed for the narrative to reveal itself (Finlay, 2011). Cate's course had finished for her, the book was closed. During the interview we flicked through the pages again, re-reading, discovering familiar lines, paragraphs and chapters. For Cate, other issues took prominence. Heideggerian 'concealment' is a phenomenological way of understanding this,

There are various ways phenomena can be covered up. It may have not been previously discovered or now hidden suggesting it was once known. Covering over may be complete or partial, remaining noticeable only in semblance. (2010, p. 34)

In my role as course leader, I had not remembered Cate using her university registration to access a learning needs assessment. Interactions with the learning support team confirmed her dyslexia, giving her answers to long held questions she had had about her struggles with word ordering. This knowledge further attuned me to the complications of Cate's dialogue and the idiosyncrasies in her phrasing, Heidegger stated;

It is language that tells us about the essence of a thing, provided that we respect language's own essence. (2011, p. 244)

Cate chose distance learning to promote, in her words, her '*wellbeing*'. This holistic and personally-orientated motivator connected practical considerations with her past learning experiences and prioritisation of her current clinical practice. She said,

You don't have to travel around the region to the university... the fact that sometimes I would end up being more anxious when I was speaking to other people on the course because they'd be telling me about all what they were doing, even if they weren't doing it particularly well and that tended to undermine my confidence. So, I was told that the course had been designed around us individually and that we'd be working and everything... you know, involved particularly in our work.

The here-and-now joined with the past and her endeavours to find **personal meaning** relating to **confidence**. Cate, revealed, *'I've done a degree myself, that's given me a lot more confidence'*. A spectrum of confidence issues interspersed Cate's story. Linguistic analysis highlighted subtleties in her use of pronouns, for example, using *'I'* for personalisation and *'you'* when taking a pragmatic stance, tentatively checking her views from different perspectives. Her learning experience was not linear, rather a set of fragile transitions that could be boosted or knocked through sensitivities to her own and others actions. Merleau-Ponty suggests,

All knowledge is established within the horizons opened up by perception. (2013, p. 215)

Perceptions of Cate's **confidence in self** interwove with her susceptibility to **academic vulnerability**. Cate recalled that returning to study was, *'really, really, really hard and I don't... and I think when I'd previously done courses... it was just... oh, it was just, I can't explain it... it was just really hard... I just didn't know what to do or how to do it...'* Removed from her accustomed personal and professional environments, Cate's **academic vulnerability** was either diminished or exacerbated by the type and level of **support** she received from her tutors as opposed to the online resources available. When Cate examined her familiar thinking she was taken cognitively, affectively and practically off-balance, which lead to a heightened sense of instability and vigilance. She remembered,

having a telephone contact and the tutor said, 'oh, we've been on the phone for an hour' and I thought yeah, you've gone off explaining all this stuff I can't understand and different things aren't really quite relevant to what we were directly talking about. So, I just think that they were maybe particularly interested in a certain way of doing things.

She felt that the content needs and tutor needs took priority over her learning needs, so she was displaced from the centre of her learning experience, and, *'it didn't really feel like the time was for necessarily for me'*.

Cate said that if she had experienced her third module first she would not have continued. Her academic vulnerability would have been too much to tolerate and her learning would have confirmed that she was (in her words) *'a failure'*. This illustrates Dewey's point that her **academic vulnerability** had deep roots, unearthed under academic stress. Fear appeared managed and overcome through time and personalised learning. When talking about another tutor Cate said, *'it just felt a lot more supported and you know the time was put aside specifically for you... it was like as if me was important, that the time was there'*. Cate's emphasis of the word *"me"* demonstrated the significance to her of personally experienced

acknowledgement. Cate went on, *'feeling a lot better, like you could... the tutor was a lot more approachable'*, which highlighted an alliance that alleviated her **academic vulnerability**. Consequently, in three of her modules, Cate established trust and **confidence** with the institution, the course and her tutors (externally located). She reflected how her tutor's confidence inspired her own (internally located) when she reported that, *'I just feel more confident and sure of myself when I'm expressing things and maybe more assertive'*. Cate seized opportunities to become academically questioning as she grappled with the perceived clash between theory and practice. She recognised that, *'I've been dealing with different people about my opinion or my ideas about things and then just sort of seeing different people coming from different areas with different points of view'*. **Interest beyond face value** appraisals permitted Cate to engage with academic questioning which required **confidence** to uncover new and potential options.

Cate was no longer an *'academic failure'* (her words). Instead, her **self-achievement** ripened as she gained awareness of her support needs and approval to challenge via interactions with her tutors. Cate learned to learn alongside her tutors. This was **more than content learning**; her tutors were technological advocates, content guides, and critical friends, and Cate remarked that, *'the most positive thing was actually having the support from the tutor'*. Her descriptions focus on a **learner-tutor relationship** based on reliable stable points of contact in a time of cognitive upheaval. When the support was absent or misaligned, the course-based challenge for Cate became the deciphering of the 'human input'. She said, *'I hadn't had feedback for a week and it was sort of coming up to time of handing stuff in and I felt uncomfortable about contacting them about thinking I think they might have missed my email but I'm not sure because I felt like I would be imposing too much'*. When unsure, Cate described herself as *'lost'*, metaphorically depicting a vast and confusing 'distance learning world'. The situation was remedied by visible and accessible tutors. Cate was not asking for immediate access but consistent and known structures of support when she commented,

making the students aware of when you are available of how often you can chat for tutorials or talking on the phone or emailing.

Cate amplified her thinking by **applying learning** to enable contextualisation. She recalled *'looking at research again and trying to apply that more to my practice or the practice within the role'*. This was a direct attempt to give her learning experience professional and **personal meaning** which can be seen in her own words:

I came on the course to prove it to myself that I could do it to be honest and also because I was lacking in confidence in my skills because I felt everybody else or all

other people I was working with had other qualifications and I just felt that I needed to do more... that I'd been stopping myself doing it because I was struggling with the academic side of work. So I had given myself a plan to do it by the time I was 40.

Cate refocused her priorities towards herself by re-evaluating previous academic barriers to form a **self-directed goal**. Measuring success with module marks provided tangible messages for self-recognition. Outweighing previous self-doubt, she noted that,

I mean, for a lot of people it shouldn't, but it really shouldn't really matter what mark you get... if you've done it, you've worked hard and you've got more understanding that was just a very personal thing.

Achieving her **self-directed goal** was an arduous journey of indistinguishable steps toward change. This is evident in her comment that, *'it's difficult to pinpoint how the course has helped but I know it's definitely given me more confidence'*. Her perseverance and determination featured in the repetition of how she, *'worked hard'* (Cate's words) on her studies. **Commitment to her own goal** needed re-prioritisation, co-operation and support at home and work, Cate recalled that, *'everybody realised how important it was for me as well and I've told them 100 times'*. Also she was offered more time for an assignment when she experienced difficulties outside the course. This act signified to Cate that her tutor and the student advisor were sensitive to her competing demands when she said, *'that was actually very helpful knowing that was there just in case because I think I'd put so much work in to it'*. Acknowledgement from others was an important aspect of feeling **valued**. Cate noted at the transcript verification meeting, *'Thinking about it now, I felt valued and cared for, I know it sounds strange, but my tutors cared about me and valued my need to learn. There were two of them in particular, I used to call them my dynamic duo, a supportive double act'*. The dependability of the tutorial approach that Cate received reduced her sense of distance from the course and brought the achievement of her self-directed goal closer too. She remarked:

I don't think it matters if you don't meet up with your tutors as long as you 'click'. I am quite an intuitive person and just the tone of the emails or the way we talked on the phone just made me feel comfortable.

For Cate, feeling **valued** resonated with her descriptions of the module structures and the tutor's own relationship to the educational process. She said, *'Just knowing the course was really important for the tutors and obviously really important for me... it did feel very, very important for them as well that things were ok for everybody'*. Cate's comment about feeling, *'not only supported tutor wise but supported with information available and the access... it was just the organisation of everything'*, identifies **organisational aspects of the course** relating to the administration, presentation of content and online tutor presence. Cate equated

organisation to feelings of confidence toward the institution, the technology and the tutors because she felt academically safe, **supported** and **valued**. Cate noted at our transcript review meeting, *'Thinking back, I hadn't realised just how reliant I was on the organisation of the modules – it made such a difference'*. In relaying these reflections, she was taken back to the impact of negative educational experience; emotional (crying and feeling alone), cognitive (thoughts of being a failure) and behavioural (not submitting). Cate's previous 'mis-learning' (Dewey, 1997) was not dispelled by her achievement.

Picking out the differences between her previous learning experience and her distance learning course, **organisational aspects of the course** knitted together Cate's descriptions of **use of time**. She identified, *'I wouldn't be wasting time travelling or wasting time in tutorials when I could have a tutorial online either with my tutor or looking at specific stuff online and going through that so it's more individual'*. Time was a major factor for individualisation and focus, she said, *'I knew this wasn't going to be for ever... I just wanted to get it done because I knew I would be really disappointed with myself if I didn't do it'*. Cate self-appraised in terms of time when she reported, *'I just knew it would take me longer than it might take... I presumed it would take me longer than maybe somebody else would do because it has always taken me a long time to do things in the past'*. Planning ahead and taking responsibility by **managing her home, work and study** created space in her already hectic schedule, she told me, *'I knew that this is what I wanted to do for myself and I'd organised my time, used annual leave, got study days'*. Cate's time investment paralleled her determination to succeed, as observed in her comment, *'I had to put so much time into it but that's what I needed to do'*.

Cate put herself back in the centre of her learning experience and had evidence to continually support her new outlook. She **self-achieved**, moving from self-uncertainty to self-assuredness. She was in a different place of self-understanding when her course ended when she revealed,

I know I've definitely got a lot more confident and assertive in my work role than I used to be but that develops over time as well. So, I definitely... I definitely felt more sure of myself and I can feel because it was such a big thing for me to achieve it does make me feel a lot better inside that I've done it and I keep going on about being more confident but that's where... that was about not feeling... probably feeling inadequate beforehand and feeling that now I'm ok'.

My attempts to understand Cates' meaning-making loops round my own self-appraisals, the double hermeneutic (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) is evident here. Merleau-Ponty eloquently suggests that,

The end of the speech or of the text will be the lifting of a spell. It is then that thoughts about the speech or text will be able to rise. (2013, p. 185)

BEN

Summary of Notes for Ben (in alphabetical order) for Step 3a
Achievement
Confidence in 'logic thinking'
Extended learning from content
Inquisitiveness in Self-learning and Clinical practice
New knowledge challenged assumptions
Perseverance in self-discovery
Securing Position to then move on
Self-change
Time challenges , meeting conflicting responsibilities
Tool for progression to meet ambition
Tutor support for affective, cognitive and technological hurdles
Validation of experience by self and others

Table 14: Summary of notes for Ben (in alphabetical order) for Step 3a

In distance learning, the student identity can become defined by their discourse. One of the gains from the interview was that Ben became visible to me as husband, father, brother and clinician. Ben is a caring man, building his professional career through his ability to attend to the needs of others. The BSc provided mooring to **secure his position** before deciding how to move forward, or, as he put it, *'I have consolidated my role as deputy manager in the home because of this course'*.

Ben allowed himself to look back, revisit and extend his knowledge within his existing attitudinal stance to 'care'. Heidegger (2010) suggests all life-experiences presuppose 'care' as foundational to the conundrum of 'being'. Care in this respect, is the structural basis for the kind of beings we are because we express concern by i) self-concern, ii) concern for things (circumspective), and iii) concern for others (solicitude) (Heidegger, 2010). Ben's concern was in developing himself for the progression of others, as he said, *'in the not too distant future I will be applying for the role of manager'*. For Ben, the course was a **tool for progression** and he acknowledged, *'I grew with the challenges'*.

Heidegger (2010) describes tools as being 'ready-to-hand'. The being of tools lies in their utility, e.g., a hammer hammers, with the features of usefulness discovered in reference to something else (reference-relations), e.g., a nail 'in-order-to' be hammered, 'in-order-to' join

wood, 'in-order-to' put up the shelf. The utility of Ben's course was 'in-order-to' be 'a *more confident practitioner*', and 'in-order-to' be 'promoted'. Just as the hammer relates to the nail, so Ben's motivation related to aspiration. Ben visualised the endpoint but not the route when recalling, '*I'd taken it for granted that having been a university student in the past, I still had that ability to write an academic piece of work but when I got all the information I required then it clicked in my mind that, oh, there's something missing here...*' The gap was the 'reference-relation' between his academic skills development and tutor support.

Heidegger (2011) observed human beings rarely question familiarity. However, the transition to philosophical questioning begins with self-questioning and for Ben, this is seen in a willingness to openly question his approaches to care and consequently himself. Ben needed to change his position and view his practice environment 'as if for the first time' (Heidegger, 2010). This provided the opportunity for Ben to widen the scope of his understanding, strengthening his **confidence** to care and lead care by using a combination of reflection and observation to challenge his thinking, Ben described, '*every question you ask will give a response and the response will also trigger another question. So that means the learning process continues*'. It is only when 'ready-to-hand' becomes the 'unready-to-hand' that awareness shifts and routines are broken that we re-evaluate and understand what constitutes the routine (Heidegger, 2010). This causes initial flux and a need for the acceptance of alternative possibilities as experienced by Ben:

Initially it was challenging... then it became interesting and by the time we completed it I think it was much, much easier for myself.

For Ben **self-change** was cumulative rather than marked by a single episode. Ben recognised discord between his experience and new understandings by questioning his assumptions. Dewey (2011) suggested that learning is achieved when former experience no longer explains a current situation. The ebb and flow between Ben's theory and clinical practice ideas created new meaning that had immediate and longer-term outcomes. Linderman, noted that 'experience is an adult learner's textbook' (1961, p. 7), and this is exemplified by Ben when he reported,

When I took this course it opened horizons for general mental health issues and also gave me the opportunity to go into detail when I did the research module and the dissertation.

Ben reduced his levels of acceptance and increased his 'preparedness', and this is observable when he says, '*I now feel that I'm adequately fit to deal with general nursing issues and also*

various mental health issues that affect the residents that we care for. As observed by Dewey (2011) this development needed time, correlating slowness with depth of the response. Time enabled initial appraisals to be translated into significant and ‘workable’ ideas. Ben recalls, *‘I didn’t see it at first, it took time, now I’ve got it’*.

Ben’s **inquisitiveness** cultivated **confidence** and asking questions became advantageous. He accepted and celebrated not knowing, as this was no longer to be regarded as a weakness but opportunity for progression when he said, *‘you don’t learn for the purpose of learning and saying I’ve got a BSc, you learn for the purpose of building yourself as an individual mentally and professionally’*. This quote reflects Heidegger (2010) reasoning that the self is not static but in constant motion as we engage with the world and others shaping our own possibilities. This is shown by Ben’s comment, *‘the course has given me access to a programme which is also very important for me to be a successful senior manager’*. Achievement at degree level gave access to a higher qualification, a composite part of internal self-progression as Ben indicates:

I think the connection is that there ought to be self-motivation, there ought to be self-esteem and there ought to be... the individual has to be responsible for what they are doing.

Ben’s self-insights flowed through his observations of **tutor support** when he deduced:

The role of the tutor is to lead you and give you moral and emotional support because I’ve seen some of the students break down, to give you the guidance on how to think in a logical academic manner and also to give you the support to be an individual who is about to research in a logical manner.

Academics employ new technologies to facilitate easier academic engagement, with online tutoring requiring the necessary competencies to meet unexpected challenges posed by learners. Content expertise is part of a wider skill set which also includes online navigational advice, technical support, pastoral care, motivational encouragement, and academic skill development. Each element has to be deliberately included and visible for each learner when needed, since online communication does not offer the same opportunities for subtle inference, as in classroom settings. For Ben, tutor support was vital when he remarked, *‘I received a lot of advice and a lot of guidance, a lot of support from the tutor. I think that was very, very important’*. Ben described **tutor support** as a learning relationship in his comment:

You learn from each other in a way that you ask questions, you get feedback from those questions then you look further down into what you’ve been advised and see whether, you know, there are issues that you need to raise again from what you’ve

been advised by your tutor. It's a mutual understanding between two people... the tutor and the student. So, that's where I believe that the student has to be proactive because you can't expect the tutor to be spoon-feeding you, you have to ask the question and the tutor will give you the response and those responses will trigger other questions.

Ben's assured language characterised his tutors as dependable, consistent and available learning partners. On various occasions he used the term '*overwhelming*' to describe the **tutor support** and connected his experience of feeling supported to the structure of the modules. The combination of structured tutor support and the module structure created a scaffold of support for Ben. This connected and supportive layering was enabling and not restrictive, and a revelation for Ben, which told in his response, '*Well, I didn't expect that structure but to be honest the structure was absolutely brilliant, it was excellent. It was done in a way to accommodate distance learning students bearing in mind that our main communicating with the tutors was via the IT system*'. The tutors and module structure both worked together to provide stability for Ben at a time of change.

A momentous change for Ben is seen in his taking time to think things through. In clinical practice immediate responses are often, but not always, required and this had arguably been Ben's thinking habit. During the course, theory and practice learning had amalgamated through '*academic thinking*' or critical thinking which he now views as, '*a process of taking a step back, identify specific issues, finding information to compare, contrast and connect before getting to a conclusion*'. Ben calls this, '*logical thinking*' concurring with ideas about 'evidenced-based practice' and 'clinical decision-making'. This thinking style bridges the clinical and academic skills gap; the same method is applicable in both contexts. Lave and Wenger (1991) argued that tutors can have an integrating effect for students by cultivating feelings of agency and bolstering salience which is more powerful than institutional engagement. It is at the personal level where Ben demonstrates most advancement, but he also acknowledged the benefits to his workplace, saying,

I was very grateful that I was given the opportunity to do this course and it has helped me as an individual and I think benefited my health care provider as well.

Ben did not take his **self-change** for granted and he hid from others the fact that he faced the fear of not completing and commented, '*subconsciously you think about it... oh my God what will happen if I fail?*' Non-completion would have had far-reaching consequences professionally, personally, and financially. Part of the concealed aspects of learning was to manage his uncertainty within himself in order to allow himself as he put it, '*to grow*'. Self-learning is not curriculum-led but individual-led. Ben describes this as a '*self-fulfilling*

experience' combined with an altruistic expression of 'benefitting' others, but this did not come easily for Ben.

Ben's 'situatedness' (Heidegger, 2010) connected to family, work and study presented energy and **time challenges**, Ben remarked, *'In my situation as well, my wife gets back late... so, as a full time employee and also having to look after the family and having academic work to do, it was extremely challenging'*. Asynchronous distance learning places the emphasis on the learner to locate content and engage with correspondence, Ben experienced this as, *'At times you would send an email to the tutor, you come back from work, you don't check your email you just concentrate on your research work or your writing or your reading... so, the following day or two days later you'll go back to your emails and you'll find the advice and guidance sent to you by the tutor'*. The potential mismatch between timeframes means deliberate action for **communication**, necessitating a shared understanding about how the interaction 'works'. If social norms of immediacy are removed, **communication** has to win over conflicting demands to be useful. Tutor and learner depend on each other's **perseverance**, time management and energy. **Perseverance** is less observable than in face-to-face deliveries where tiredness or outside demands are more overtly apparent. Distance learners have to actively seek companionship and advice. Paradoxically, despite the availability of multiple modes of communication, tutor support may be lost or slowed because of time pressures, either because it is not sought, picked up or understood by the learner, rather than by being absent. Ben's learning experience culminated in a series of 'trial and error' strategies to best engage with his learning, for, as he said, *'you have to work things out for yourself'*.

Despite being a personal learning journey, Ben brought along his close family, friends and colleagues, receiving validation for his efforts at home and work through the interest of others. He shared his learning experience directly and indirectly. As the course progressed, Ben met the 'core' learning and moved beyond threshold concepts (Meyer & Timmermans, 2014), disseminating **new knowledge** (Steineker & Bell, 1979) about the content and how to learn. At home his efforts were noticed by his daughter who, without prompting joined Ben to study. He observed:

I had some issues with her doing her homework and this and that but when she realised that I came back from work, I had to sit down, take my books out and started reading then she took her books out as well and started doing her homework. So, she benefitted quite a lot from my experiences as a student.

I would have not known this consequence without our conversation. Behind the computer screen, it is easy to forget the circumstances of people's lives and the ripple effects of their

learning activities. Ben's daughter saw his learning 'in action', and this was positively received by Ben when he reflected, *'I was surprised because I said to myself this is a situation of look and learn what somebody's doing. Dad is doing something good'*. At the transcript review meeting, Ben noted how, *'my daughter continues to get on with her homework, even now. I think my studying helped her to find her own motivation'*. Ben's studying actions permeated to a deep, integrative level, and signified **extended learning**. This experience made changes to his and others 'way of being'. He can see this for himself when he concludes:

People are now recognising my achievement at work and even now when I went for the graduation I sent my pictures back home and everyone knew about the graduation. So, everyone says ok, we have an expert here.

Ben developed a different way to interact with his clinical environment. He moved from passive to active by taking a lead in his own clinical expertise, and from recipient to author (Baxter Magolda, 2010). He substantiates this by saying, *'From time to time when these meetings are held my home manager would say, Ben you have got a good understanding of various issues that are going to be discussed in this meeting. So, do you mind attending the meeting and representing the care home and I'm very happy to do that because the horizon has been opened up and the experience I gained when I was doing the course, the research I did, the research I continue to do on various mental health issues has helped me as an individual'*. Ben is now a clinician known by others to be **inquisitive**; he is the person who finds things out. Ben has become a 'care influencer' as well as 'care provider'.

ADAM

Summary of Notes for Adam (in alphabetical order) for Step 3a
Academic Uncertainty resulting from novelty of degree level distance learning
Commitment to development
Communication between tutor, course and learner
Confidence in personal and professional self
Individualized outcomes
Learning strategies for now and future
Personal development
Professional Development
Questioning self and others
Role of Tutor to foster academic confidence
Self-Appraisal
Time demands and pressures

Table 15: Summary of notes for Adam (in alphabetical order) for Step 3a

Adam had a certainty and clarity of expression, as if his ideas had already been given colour, waiting to be placed on the picture of his distance learning experience. His responses materialised as he stood back and looked into his experience:

I chose the course because I wanted to top up from my diploma... I couldn't achieve a degree at the time for personal reasons... there was a lot going on and I was focusing on my work, you know going through the practical things at work rather than just the academic side but I was really struggling at the time. I always wanted to do a 'top up', I always wanted to get a degree... it was actually I needed to get a degree to be a manager of the ward.

Undertaking the degree course added the role of 'undergraduate' to the existing roles of father, son, brother, and worker that Adam was already fulfilling. Each role placing a different emphasis on time, needing cognitive, affective and practical organisation (Merleau-Ponty, 2013, p. 114). Adam's phrase, '*protected time*' delineated physical and cognitive space to study. He said that, '*to just have that protected time to work on what's needed would have been the only way that I could have achieved the course*'. Linguistically, 'protected' indicated these hours were 'looked after' with the terminology exposing uniqueness of use. Study time was added to a jigsaw of his life, requiring the assembly of multiple interlocking demands. He 'organised' the pieces but needed flexibility because puzzles test and are achieved incrementally, Adam observed, '*I don't think you can do things at once when you're doing these courses. You need to have your full attention and focus*'. He took control of the 'how, where and when' of his academic work, focusing on himself, finding what he described as, '*complete study time*', uncluttered by other demands. Adam gave an example of this where, '*my son would go off and my wife would go off so I'd have the house to myself and that was protected time*'.

An Adam-centred approach to learning was in action:

I suppose that's where the protected time comes in, you don't get distracted; you can read at your own pace... people work in different ways, I suppose, don't they? You don't have the distractions of having to have breaks at certain times and people asking questions that you wouldn't necessarily ask which can cause additional time in the lecture.

Adam's position counters expectations of social learning (Niewolny & Wilson, 2011), where 'others' are not assumed to be contributors. In distance learning, the classroom is replaced by a technologically mediated learning environment where dialogue, commentary and evidence is accessed as the learner prefers. Sharing ideas, concerns and insights remained important but 'social learning' gained a broader, media rich context, no longer constrained by the

parameters of time or physical location. Adam-centred learning brought responsibility, linking independent **learning strategies** to an existing practice-based milieu, with both requiring self-governance. As Adam explained:

you feel you've got more responsibility to manage your own time. You haven't got you know, a... someone there saying right you've got to do this by this date... they just didn't... I know they probably suggest that online but you know sometimes if there's a person telling you... right, you've got to do this by this date you'll do it. However, it makes you feel more responsible or you're an independent adult... you know you've got this deadline and I think that sets you up and you'll need that sort of approach when you go into your career that you're not going to always have someone saying... right, why haven't you done this? Why haven't you done that? You need to be responsible for it.

The unfamiliarity of distance learning triggered practical and affective anxieties for Adam initiating **academic uncertainty**, exclusive to this situation. The combination of engagement with degree level study (QAA, 2014), the VLE, and new ways of communicating were unfamiliar, as described by Adam:

The first module was interesting. I think also scary, slightly anxiety-provoking in the sense that I hadn't... I hadn't distance learnt before, the lack of not seeing other people, the lack of not being able to go to, you know, a classroom base to speak to other people and pass on ideas but actually once you progress into the course you find there's a forum, that you can mail other people.

Adam used a combination of tactics to reconcile the effects of **academic uncertainty**, including positive 'self-talk', seeking support from others (e.g. family, work, tutor, and learning peers), locating and accessing 'helping' resources, and reminding himself of his motivational reasons for continuing on this learning journey. The sense of travelling is noted by Adam's comment, '*I thought, oh, you know it's not going the way that I thought but then I thought no, I've come too far*'.

Adam's expressions of his polarised perceptions of tutor support are entwined with affective appraisal. He is sensitive to the style of tutorial **communication** and the perceived messages in, and concealed between, the lines of written and verbal communications, when he claims:

I mean, that was one of the main advantages and one of the main positives of doing the course was the relationship you have with the tutors... the sort of trust there if you're struggling or if you've got a question that you think, oh we need to get that answered rather than feeling anxious and thinking this is going to take a while to get a response. If you get a response within an hour or something and you can call me if you like, that's what made the course special and yeah... that was the major positive.

'Adam-focused' **communication** (by varying means) confirmed that his tutors were as committed to the learning process as he was. This level of interaction transmitted certainty in a learning environment dependent on active participation. Timely **communication** released reciprocity, nurturing learning autonomy. Adam describes individual learning differently from learner autonomy; the former refers to practical organisation, and the latter referring to cognitive and affective abilities. Metaphorically, Adam suggests tutors 'unlock' learning and they can also lock it again, when he says: '*the teacher is key*'. To develop this idea further, Adam highlighted factors which opened and closed his learning progress:

When you feel assured... if I had a question, I'd feel safe and confident saying I don't really understand about this, could you give me some examples or could you give me some feedback about how I could approach this side of the assignment? And know that person is going to be honest and truthful and transparent and say yeah, this is how... this is maybe a good way of doing it, it's a good example, have you thought about reading this or about reading that and it's a quick response. So, you can look at it, you can read up on it straight away and you think, yep, I get that straight away. If you don't get that and you're emailing people and they're not getting back to you for a week and you're trying to ring and it's an 0845 number and no one's calling, no one's responding and another week's gone, that's two weeks gone; that's two weeks where you're stuck on that same question and you're thinking right, I've got a deadline and it really, really effects the overall... the overall experience for the learner.

When tutorial access was unavailable, Adam was stranded, removed from tried and tested responses, revealing another facet of **academic uncertainty**. Appraisal only came from his own perspective. Explanations of the situation from others could not be easily sought. His was a lone voice, distinct from a collective throng, he reflected, '*I think if it had been classroom-based, I probably would have been made more... I wouldn't want to say complain...*' This indicates that distance learners and tutors have a shared responsibility and communicational inter-dependency. Timely responses are noted as a feature which held Adam's learning experience together by mediating anxieties provoked by the online learning environment. van Manen argues that, 'The teacher teaches with the head and the heart and must feelingly know what is the appropriate thing to do in ever changing circumstances' (1995, p. 1). The assurance of a caring person behind the technological wall offers constancy in a dynamic and sometimes 'troublesome' (Meyer & Land, 2005, p. 1) learning process, Adam suggested:

you feel more positive, so you put more effort into your work... when things start going wrong you sort of get a bit despondent and maybe avoid things but if you're feeling positive and you're feeling assured that you know, if you've got a problem and if it's explained to you in a way that you can understand, you don't get as much anxiety and of course when you're not as anxious your mind works more effectively, so I think the whole experience and the whole outcome is different which is why I think that role as tutor is really, really important.

Theory and practice fused **responsibility** and **communication** to academic security. Adam's differing interactions led to his consideration of the tutor's role and 'expertise', when recalling:

One tutor was brilliant and was very helpful throughout and very knowledgeable and was very robust in getting, you know... getting back to me through emails and communication, so I found that really positive. The other tutor was completely the opposite; didn't get back to me with any queries, wouldn't respond... didn't seem to really know what she was doing... maybe I don't know but I didn't find it enjoyable.

The technologically-based interaction became a stage where tutors 'performed' their roles. Distance learning tutors are exposed because each **communication** is logged by a precise time record as evidenced in email, audio/video conferencing and telephone calls. The content of learner and tutor interactions are visible (or not) for others to see. The lack of communication from one tutor caused concern and conflict, reinforcing the geographical and academic distance between learner and tutor. Messages from the other tutor were assured and aimed to reassure. The transparency of the contact in terms of time and content instilled safety and confidence for Adam in this period of uncertainty, being particularly notable when Adam stated:

I felt valued, you know you are a person and you know you've got anxieties and you've got you know when I just felt like you know, someone sends an email and you at least get a response and I'm busy but I'll have a look and get back to you. That's fine and I think it's really imperative that you get someone who understands the system and the assignment and what's needed and I think if you have someone who's got their own confidence and understanding of the course and then they can pass that on to you, that's what is really important.

Adam needed academic role models to mirror **commitment** and academic confidence, but without a classroom to display positive academic behaviours, he sought other methods. Online assignment construction provided the forum for tutors to demonstrate academic skills visibly and a place where Adam could practice his developing academic skills. This formative process presented Adam with a text-based barometer of his personal and **professional development**. van Manen remarks that, 'It is in the act of reading and writing that insights occur' (2006, p. 715) and this was the case for Adam when he said:

I mean the content certainly... you know is very important and I think that sets you up... it makes you reflect on who you are as a person and when you go through the good and the bad times throughout the assignments it makes you realise... ok, you actually know you achieved that at the end and it was difficult but I achieved it and I think you learn something from that. You know, on the flip side, if you're not achieving something you go for help and you have to search that out and you have to make sure that you email the right people. So again, you are having to be responsible for seeking help and if you don't go and seek help and you don't achieve something, again that's your responsibility.

Individualised outcomes led Adam to share his new knowledge and learning experience in his clinical setting. He gained **confidence** through connecting theory and practice whilst also empathising with colleagues. His learning was translated and developed in his familiar day-to-day interactions when he states:

I mean, confidence when speaking to staff nurses, confidence when speaking to students because you can all too quickly lose that skill of having to do you know an assignment, research and referencing. It brings you back into context about making... confidence in the sense of, yeah, I'm doing an essay and I know how you feel, this is what I'm reading, you know, I'm up to date.

Adam found himself in an unexpected position, finding new meaning in his 'taken-for-granted' thinking (Heidegger, 2010). He re-evaluated his familiar thinking and actions by questioning himself and other people. Adam identified, *'I think when you complete an assignment, when you complete a degree I think it improves academically, you as a person and practically. I think it has a dual sort of role in making you a more practiced nurse/manager, I think it does improve you'*. Another element of threshold concepts (Meyer & Land, 2005) is that learning is irreversible, Adam cannot go back to previous ways of thinking and practicing because a significant change had happened. Adam assimilated enquiry into his routine practice and **questioning** now contributes to his clinical conversations by confirming, *'I think it makes you feel empowered and I think it makes, from my experience, the person that you're supporting, it makes them feel confident'*.

Adam's **self-appraisal** was not confined to a degree award, and this childhood aspiration became an integral part of his home and work life. This was a deeply felt experience for Adam who summed this up as a,

Good thing for me. Good thing for my family. Good thing for the future generation, my children, I think. A good thing for the people I work with and good thing for patients on the ward.

Section Summary

Undertaking Step 3 (Develop emerging (prototype) themes for each case), I realised that tuning into what the participants told me necessitated hearing about myself, resonating with Smith, Flowers and Larkin's proposition that,

'at each stage the analysis does indeed take you further away from the participant and includes more of you. However, 'the you' is closely involved with the lived experiences

of the participant – and the resulting analysis will be the product of both of your collaborative efforts'. (2009, p. 92)

Working through the lens of IPA, my initial experience of data analysis has enabled me to achieve a deeper understanding of the component parts of the double hermeneutic. To sense-make from the participants making sense of their experience requires the researcher to be open to the data, whilst having a conscious, reflexive awareness of themselves.

Step 4: Searching Connections across Emerging Themes for each Participant (Process and Rationale)

Emerging themes in IPA are concise phrases describing an advanced stage of abstraction (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). To maintain closeness to the data, I used the Analyse functions on NVivo to check my developing insights between cases. Using a number of the search routines, I assembled and searched data subsets locating, comparing and compiling phrases, annotations, and notes for each transcript. The list of emerging phrases tested out words that would most neatly define the themes. Although, NVivo sorted the data efficiently, I also manually completed Step 4 because arranging the prototype themes was an ongoing and reflective process as new ideas came to mind and could not be hurried. I found the computer screen restrictive for this activity, preferring the larger scale and physicality of a wall-mounted board (one for each participant) with emerging themes written on separate pieces of paper and attached using fixing tack. This changing picture was constantly on view and easily accessible. Rather than a straightforward analytical procedure, this was a hermeneutic pursuit, my senses of sight and touch assisting cognitive deliberation (Merleau-Ponty, 2013). I placed like with like (abstraction) and re-named the collections to describe the essential features. I recorded the words chosen each time to highlight indicative terms for the final master and subthemes.

Finally I noticed patterns evolving across the four participants' boards enabling me to create broad collective themes. Table 16 indicates how the insights gained from the emerging themes corresponds to varying aspects of change and that the change described appeared as a layered processes.

	<i>Developing Emergent Individual and Collective Themes</i>			
Collective	DORA	CATE	BEN	ADAM
<i>Changing Focus toward Self Concern</i>	<i>Re-focusing</i> Taking control of time features and course-based challenge by reviewing priorities for self and those given by others.	<i>Prioritisation</i> New focus and commitment to self by reorganising time and priorities in and outside work to achieve self-directed goal.	<i>Professional Advancement</i> Reconnecting with clinical confidence securing current position and opening progression opportunities.	<i>Concern (for self and others)</i> Personal - development firmly established as foundational to professional development.
<i>Self-assessed learning needs</i>	<i>Interface</i> Flexible use of technology shaped learning partnership between learner, tutor and course.	<i>Academic Vulnerability</i> Aroused from not knowing. It can facilitate or prevent development and is shaped by tutor relational factors.	<i>Perseverance</i> Time challenges have to be pre-empted, acknowledged and managed.	<i>Re-evaluation</i> Recognition of potential needed tutor supported self-appraisal of achievements to mediate academic stress.
<i>Exposure to Learning</i>	<i>Restoration</i> Admission and willingness to finding something lost in professional role.	<i>Approaches</i> Learning profits from structure, support and security in organisational course processes.	<i>Engagement</i> Rapport with tutor fosters reception of support and increased motivation for self-learning.	<i>Determination</i> Reviewing priorities; hard work, time and commitment are needed to achieve individualised outcomes.
<i>Developing Confidence to Question</i>	<i>Validation</i> 'More than content learning' provided opportunities for personal meaning and a positive sense of self.	<i>Influences</i> Learner/tutor relationship is a substantial factor in the experience of questioning assumptions of self, others and content.	<i>Personal growth</i> Confidence generated inquisitiveness and inquisitiveness generated self, clinical and, leadership confidence.	<i>Mechanisms</i> Guiding scaffolds and strategies needed to learn how to (and from) questioning both in short and longer term.
<i>Learning and Self</i>	<i>Integration</i> Learning not course-bound, learning strategies encouraged ongoing curiosity, new need to take time review assumptions.	<i>Assurance</i> Feeling valued and supported as a learner built confidence in self and others widening access to discover deeper content.	<i>Authenticity</i> Extended learning for caring confidently steered new knowledge, understanding and access to options.	<i>Connection</i> Rapport with tutor fashioned ideas of tutor role based on experiences of communication and impact on self and learning experience.

Detection of Self-change	<i>Opportunities</i> Routine practice no longer routine, set roles are no longer set, change is now a viable possibility.	<i>Accomplishment</i> Achievement of a self-directed goal provided self-recognition through personal meaning.	<i>Recognition</i> Self and others take a new view of ability and potential as a consequence of achievement.	<i>Perspective change</i> Answers now not the goal, continual questioning forms the new clinical lens.
Sharing learning with others	<i>Dissemination</i> Connections with others through (clinical) currency allowed sharing of continuing learning experience.	<i>Integration</i> Content and new found curiosity assimilated securely into routine practice.	<i>Influencing</i> Learning experience created ongoing interest in others in terms of content, process and outcome.	<i>Advocating</i> New understanding used to progress self and others by confidently challenging and acceptance to be challenged.

Table 16: Summary of developing emergent individual and collective themes

Section Summary

This chapter began with four diverging stories, told at the personal level, but analysis uncovered convergence in the collective experience of change. The analytic process reminded me of a child's exercise in tessellation, closely arranging shapes so they fix together without gaps. I found particular challenge in preserving the unique features of each participant's story while outlining a potential idiographic framework for Step 6. The difficulties faced in the experiential process, required me to work hard to translate the guidance offered by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) into my own research. From this research activity, I understood more about the internal workings of IPA from theoretical and practice points of view, both converging in the shared purpose of discovering more about the research question.

Steps 5 and 6: Consolidating the view - Move to the Next Case and Develop Meaning by Reviewing the Ground Covered

In Step 5, the route carved through the first four Steps with Dora was carefully documented and repeated for the three remaining participants. With repetition, critics may assume that the analytic path became familiar, however this was not my experience. Each journey was distinct, providing discrete insights and hurdles. The landscape changed with each participant as the

cognitive and affective climate altered. Therefore, the process remained the same, the experience differed.

As outlined by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), Step 6 has two components. First, one must identify cross-case patterns and second, find deeper levels of interpretation. The first part of step 6 is presented here, and the second in Chapter 7, as I digress to consider my own position in Chapter 6 because this underpins my later interpretation. Therefore, to aid the demonstration of my analytic process, I will now present how in this sixth and final Step, I searched for deeper associations in and between emerging themes (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014) with the aim of crafting a cohesive narrative. I worked with the prototype themes from Step 4 and realised I was detecting a process describing 'change', and my task was to understand the source, subtleties and constituent parts. Smith, Flowers and Larkin state this is a, 'particularly creative task' (2009, p. 101) and Smythe *et al.* (2008) suggest that this type of analysis entails an 'in-the-play' situation. In practice, Step 6 is only possible within the evolving relationship the analyst has with the data. My analytic movement around the data highlighted that Smith, Flowers and Larkin's (2009) six step process is far from linear. The Steps are not a checklist for analysis but acted as viewpoints capturing the panorama of experience. Meaningful descriptions of the participants' lifeworlds were achieved through iterative engagement with the data by means of reflexive appraisal, and through writing. Gadamer opens Part III of his book, *Truth and Method*, with Schleiermacher's quote, 'Everything presupposed in hermeneutics is but language' (2013, p. 398). Hence, I needed to craft the language carefully to communicate this final part of my interpretation satisfactorily.

Using the process of abstraction, I grouped conceptual similarities and produced descriptive labels for each cluster of themes. I next separated the prototype themes for each participant, giving them the resemblance of mosaic tiles. Matching, reconfiguring and reviewing revealed the best fit for the master- and sub-theme patterns which had surfaced during NVivo analysis, and confirmed that my observations had strong evidential foundations. Unlike Step 4, the transcripts were scrutinised simultaneously and I investigated a range of potential meanings for each master theme label. Systematically asking questions of each master theme stimulated questions in the other themes, and resolution was found by delving back into the data, embodying Gadamer's opinion that, 'The art of questioning is the art of questioning ever further' (2013, p. 375). Returning repeatedly to the phenomena ensured the critical characteristics (Willig, 2008) of the experience of distance learning were included as described by participants. The new labels given to the themes used wording to explicitly capture the participants' meaning, linguistically and interpretively.

The final wording of the master themes was clarified and contextualised by the sub-themes, making the abstract visible. The trajectory of the master themes provided a representation of change, consistent with perspective shift (Mezirow & Taylor, 2011). The change was initiated when the participants turned their attention toward themselves, which allowed them to recognise and accept alternatives to their taken-for-granted thinking. The accompaniment of others, especially their tutors, provided the stability and reassurance necessary to take intellectual risks and to adapt previous ways of thinking in the light of new understandings. In this way, their learning was activated through assimilation in everyday life. The connections between the master themes illuminated how the participants' stories emphasised distinctive layering to the components of change described. This interpretative lens is consistent with Smith, Flowers and Larkin's assertion of, 'the part is interpreted in relation to the whole and the whole is interpreted in relation to the part' (2009, p. 92).

Representation of Thematic Framework

This section provides an overview of the themes elicited at Step 6 followed by a close perspective commentary explaining the composite thematic framework. Careful tracking of the features uniting the stories along with the implications taken directly from the stories themselves ensured Yardley's (2008) four quality principles of;

- i) sensitivity to context
- ii) commitment and rigour
- iii) transparency
- iv) coherence, and impact and importance

The master themes identified are unique though combine the data succinctly, expressively and openly. To shape the data analysis using parallel words (coincidentally beginning with the letters C R and A) emerged naturally during the process, but once observed became a useful device to ensure that the analysis was maximally exhaustive and inclusive in order structure of themes from the analysis. In Table 17, master themes are identified using italics, the subthemes are underlined and the resulting perspective shift is noted in bold. The table is then explained using an initial narrative conceptualisation. The narrative conceptualisation is recast in Chapter 7 to suggest five pedagogical tenets of the distance learning experience.

Master Themes	Sub Themes	Representation of Change
<i>Attention</i> creates readiness to learn	<u>Concern</u> <u>Commitment</u> <u>Conversion</u>	Refocus time and existing priorities to concentrate on the self
<i>Acceptance</i> means viewing the self as a learner	<u>Appraisal</u> <u>Academic Vulnerability</u> <u>Agility</u>	Rethink expectations of self, ability and opportunity.
<i>Accompaniment</i> comprises of help to learn	<u>Connections</u> <u>Care</u> <u>Control</u>	Relate to others to validate and challenge new thinking.
<i>Adaptation</i> happens because of learning	<u>Curiosity</u> <u>Consistency</u> <u>Confidence</u>	Review previous ways of feeling, thinking and doing to evaluate new understanding.
<i>Activation</i> is a multi-layered way of using learning.	<u>Agency</u> <u>Assimilation</u> <u>Advocacy</u>	Respond , continue to use new learning strategies for self and others.

Table 17: Master themes, sub themes and representation of change

Initial Narrative Conceptualisation of Perspective Shifts

Theme 1: *Attention* is needed to be ready to learn, necessitating the **refocus** of time and existing priorities to concentrate on the self.

Participants narrated a winding trail from their starting place of habitual, unquestioned thinking where others were the primary focus, to a position of turning *attention* inward. Concern for their own progression was a motivating factor for commitment and generated the need for conversion. Conversion was described in practical, cognitive, and affective terms, necessitating modifications in time management and prioritisation at home and work. Rather than taking an either/or approach to work, home, and study, participants' activities and thinking were proactively adapted to meet the range of conflicting demands.

Theme 2: *Acceptance* is about viewing the self as a learner by **rethinking** expectations of self, ability, and opportunity.

Although the modules related directly to their practice, the combination of the online environment with the course content placed the participants in unfamiliar surroundings. As experienced practitioners, they had a sense of expertise, but as distance learners their sense of control was unsettled and challenged. They needed to accept and work with their new situation, and they had to quickly acclimatise to a new, technologically-mediated setting. The infrastructure and design of the VLE prompted unexpected appraisals of their learning needs, attitudes to learning, aptitude for online learning, and clinical currency. The shift from clinical expert to distance learning novice triggered academic vulnerability. This specific vulnerability manifested from a combination of previous learning experiences, returning to study and using a new mode of learning. Academic vulnerability had the dichotomising effects of either paralysing or empowering. When participants experienced academic vulnerability negatively, it engendered feelings of frustration and rejection. However, their recognition and engagement (with the VLE and the tutors) put them at ease with 'not knowing'. As perspective changes occurred, the participants cognitive agility developed, mediating their affective tensions.

Theme 3: *Accompaniment* refers to the learning which occurs from **relating** to others to validate and challenge thinking.

The theme of *accompaniment* arose from participants' perceptions of how online tutors and virtual learning resources influence distance learning. Connections were essential to progression and were found in subtle and overt encounters, and discerned by participants both affectively and cognitively through what was, and was not, seen, heard, and read. Connections with tutors, the construction of the VLE and the module content represented ways of thinking about care. The participants were more used to caring professionally for others, so to feel cared for by people (tutors) they had never met was surprising and highly valued. Care was observed in practical measures characterised by timely, personalised tutor responses, and in the pedagogic construction of the VLE, or indeed, any action that put the learner at the centre of their own learning experience. The affective consequence resonated in motivation and enhanced confidence, and was disseminated beyond the course. When care was less apparent, the asymmetry of control and power between tutor and learner eclipsed the positive learning experience.

Theme 4: *Adaptation* happens through **reviewing** previous ways of feeling, thinking and doing to evaluate new understandings.

The experience of distance learning led to the *adaptation* of thinking and acting rather than any specific course content. As the participants reviewed their previous ways of thinking, they re-positioned 'not knowing' as an opening for curiosity, an unforeseen positive consequence of tutor-led strategies to question. Questioning was a constituent of academic and clinical confidence. The ability for the participants to challenge, seek and evaluate purposed secure justifications inspired transition from routine, dependent acceptance to innovative, independent thinking. Consistency within the tutoring role, and consistency in the pedagogic approach, propagated a safe environment for participants to take intellectual risks, extend thinking, and challenge convention. Conversely, when consistency was absent (in either tutoring or pedagogic approach), the learning environment became a hostile maze of confusion, where uncertainty created a battleground for clarity. The participants' need 'to know' from others (tutors) took precedence over creative, independent insights. Paradoxically, tutor expectations for independence fuelled learner dependence.

Theme 5: *Activation* is a multi-layered way of using learning by **responding** with new learning strategies to self and others.

Lastly, the collective description led to a place of action and application. The activation of the participants' learning experiences permitted insight into the implications beyond course completion. As learners, they were influenced by the tutors and directed by the course content. They are now influencers, taking their own paths, initiating dialogue and prompting clinical review. They have a new sense of agency and control, positioned at the intersections of interaction and self-development. Participants can now shape and reshape their contexts in new and meaningful ways. Their assimilation of courage and commitment to evaluative thinking has opened opportunities for sharing, role modelling and dissemination at home and work, and they have become advocates for learning. Advocacy has taken many forms but ultimately, the participants describe using their learning experience for the benefit of themselves and others, now and in the future.

To add visual clarity and summarise the narrative discussion in this chapter thus far, Table 18 depicts the filtering process of translating initial notes from each participant into the collective themes.

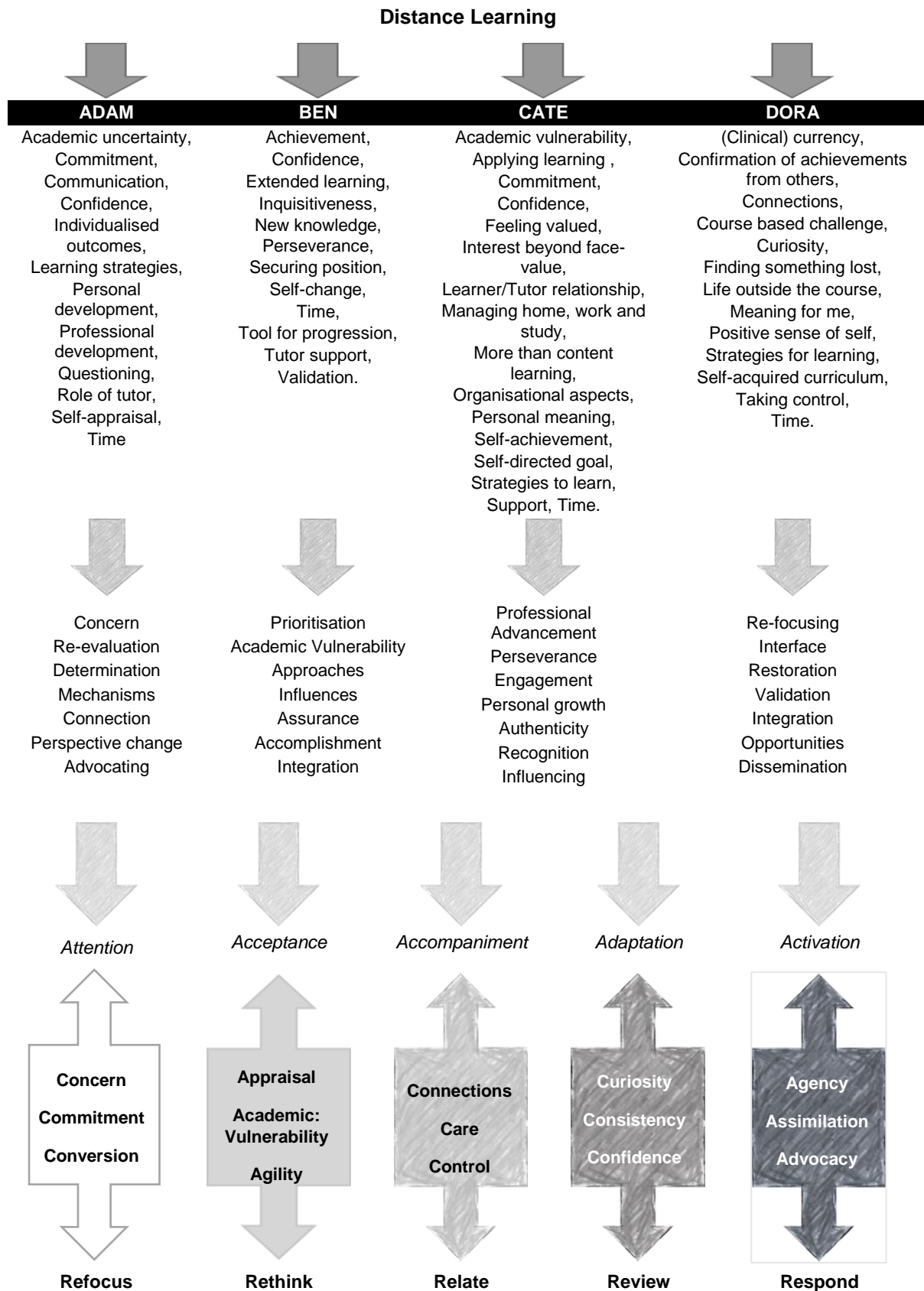


Table 18: Translation of initial notes to themes

Chapter Summary

The complex data analysis process maintains 'fidelity to the phenomena' by keeping close proximity to the participants' experience (Kvale, 1996). IPA is phenomenological and hermeneutic and the participants' words speak for themselves and through my interpretations, their words give insight into the phenomena under enquiry (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) in the data analysis. Steps 1 to 3 established initial notes which were translated into discrete prototype themes for each participant in Step 4. Step 5 returned me to each participant, looking into their unique experience anew, while ensuring the same analytic process for each case. In this step, I learned to reflexively manage my own personal insights and keep the focus on the individual participant narrative. In Step 6, the process of hermeneutic refinement resulted in five master themes, which describe the participants making and finding sense in their graduate status. The sub-themes give texture and detail through contextualisation and meaning. Finally, the themes map to a process of change through perspective shift, and in Chapter 7, useable tenets associated with the process of transformation are identified.

Chapter 6: Reflexive Positioning – The view outside from within

Introduction

The previous chapter identifies and presents descriptive insights from the data. Before continuing on with Step 6 and moving to a deeper interpretive frame (Chapter 7), I further indicate the rigour and utility of my work by reflexively positioning myself in the analytic process and explain more about my insertion of Sub-Step 3b. I am attentive to the complexity of IPA analysis balancing this against Agee's (2009) claim that the research question is the cornerstone of the enquiry. The question for this thesis derives from practice-based observations, combined with my spotting the lack of alumni voice in the distance learning literature and so, I am 'in' the research from conception to final report. Therefore, my phenomenological attitude (Finlay, 2008) is pivotal to the relationship between the researcher and what is researched for confident IPA outcomes (Smith, 2011), which may be of benefit in my practice world. The methodological extension of Sub-Step 3b is an original contribution, explicitly expressing where I am in the data and how I use data to gain deeper insight. As a result, this chapter presents aspects the reflexive 'workings out' of my research experience, and is not intended to represent reflexivity as a single or confined event. Finding, exploring and relaying the links between myself and the data ensures this report is authentic, imaginative and has recognisable quality markers throughout (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013b).

In Chapter 3, IPA is demonstrated to incorporate reflexivity right the way through the research process (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008; Huff, 2014), because of the challenges to setting aside prior expectations and assumptions (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Chapter 4, further considers researcher reflexivity in respect of my research design and method, and, in Chapter 5, themes are reflexively developed. Hence, scrutiny of my researcher role features constantly in this research story, determining how my 'insider' position sculpts the data collection and analysis (van Manen, 1990). As an 'insider', I have a current working knowledge of the course and while not a nurse, I have practitioner-level and managerial-level knowledge of the mental health contexts the participants are a part of. However, my current perspective stems from an assortment of experiences which may or may not influence my insights and reasoning. The point being that interpretative analysis is not straightforward, because of the complexity of the analyst themselves and the complexity of the world they exist in.

Reflexivity gives impetus to phenomenological researchers to consciously embed themselves amidst the data, with theory and practice informing insights (Finlay, 2011). Applying my

understanding of the philosophical origins of IPA to the fieldwork and analysis phases of this research, my intellectual capacity to remain open to the data has strengthened, reinforcing my position as the central analytic instrument. Consequently, the interjection of this chapter between data analysis (Steps 1-6) and interpretation (continuation of Step 6) reveals the echoes between the phenomena, the data, and my own experience. At this stage of moving from description to interpretation, the participant and researcher perspectives can be placed alongside the literature, establishing wide angle and narrow focus viewpoints to get closer to the phenomena under investigation (Shaw, 2010a).

Observations by Morse (1994) and Holloway (2005) identify reflexivity as fostering self-exploration, promoting researcher-awareness. When looking back to the beginning of my EdD journey, I now see my researcher role was isolated from my clinical and educational self. As time passed, re-positioning my 'researcher self' meant encompassing my historicity to unite my previous and current roles. Gadamer advocates for openness:

This kind of sensitivity involves neither "neutrality" with respect to content nor the extinction of one's self, but the foregrounding and appropriation of one's own fore-meanings and prejudices. The important thing is to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings (2013, p. 268–269).

Gadamer's words are meaningful because the personal characteristics which attracted me to my professional career, and which have matured over the last twenty-five years, influence my researcher self. For example, my need for action to have reason and purpose, my concern for others, along with my creative problem solving skills, are instrumental in how I have understood and used IPA. However, my experience of the EdD programme taught me to not pre-empt or seal off the script of my own self-definition.

In further developing the idea of openness, Dahlberg *et al.* advise phenomenological researchers to assume an 'open discovering way of being', as they contend that, 'Openness is the mark of a true willingness to listen, see, and understand. It involves respect and a certain humility toward the phenomenon, as well as sensitivity and flexibility' (2008, p. 98). Similarly, Churchill suggests that openness is simultaneously empathic and compassionate, where interactions with another (an Other) offer an opportunity to 'hear the ethical call that summons us to respond with compassion' (2012, p. 9). The openness I thought I once had has been challenged, modified, and progressed. I now see the need to be open to myself as well as to others. In IPA research, the task of generating knowledge through understanding is profoundly dialectical, supported by the double hermeneutic (Smith, 2004). My research thinking, actions,

and attitudes, merge with Heidegger's proposition, in that I am both part of and apart from the phenomenon under investigation,

The being whose analysis is our task, is always we ourselves. The being of this being is always *mine*. In the being of this being it is related to its being. As the being of this being, it is entrusted to its own being. It is being about which being is concerned. (2010, p. 41 [emphasis in original])

Researcher as an Analytic Instrument

Understanding myself as an analytic instrument in the internal workings of IPA, I acknowledge interpretations of the data are set in the temporal frame and belong to me. In agreement with Golafshani (2003), I am wrapped in the entire qualitative research process, sewing together from the inside, the threads of rigour and trustworthiness. Therefore, this chapter distinguishes practical reflexivity which is evidenced by means of observable audit from a philosophical meaning, whereby I come to own the data. This aspect of reflexivity is not a paper trail, but an intellectual shift made visible via reflexive contemplation. My stance is justified because the descriptive phenomenological tradition of bracketing, where the researcher strives to push their expectations and assumptions aside (Barker, Pistrang & Elliott, 2002), is rejected in IPA. Instead, emphasis is placed on critical self-awareness and how the researchers' own beliefs, values, experiences, and, interests potentially sway the collection and interpretation of qualitative data. IPA recognises that preserving an objective stance is neither feasible nor practical in professionally-based research (Willig, 2008) and so the cadence of the data will be different for everyone who has contact with it. For me, in this context reflexivity is multifunctional, serving as a self-appraisal technique to recognise myself in the research process. Engaging with reflexivity safeguards my psychological well-being and intellectual integrity, the participants' involvement, the gift of data and, the final report.

In addition, the inclusion of Sub-Step 3b Echoes responds to an inherent threat to phenomenological research concerned with the researcher's ability to use and convey complex philosophical ideas in ways that are meaningful to the research and accessible to the reader (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Criticism comes from the confusion surrounding the mystery and jargon of phenomenology (Norlyk & Harder, 2010). Rather than shrouding my phenomenological position and analytic process, I am making the intellectual transition from raw data to interpretative insights visible.

Field Notes

Reflexive examples are offered in Chapter 4 and I now further articulate realisations made during the first three steps of data analysis (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Repeatedly reading and listening to the raw data drew out initial notes. My thinking oscillated between what I saw, heard, felt, and connected with. To deal with my jumble of thoughts, I had to stop and reflexively appraise what belonged in my world and the participants' descriptions of their world of distance learning. The practical journeying through the initial analytic phase was more challenging than I expected and I had to take stock intellectually of what was happening. My field notes took shape as a chronicle of me and my changing relationship with the data and it is there I discovered an original contribution to the research practice of IPA, with the additional Sub-Step, which I termed 3b Echoes. The Sub-Step is a stopping-off point to view myself in the data, before proceeding to deeper levels of interpretative work. This analytic adjunct characterises my pivotal point of realising, through my writing, the significance of the ongoing conversation between myself and the data. I understood then that being reflexive for me, means transmitting what is arising intellectually in order to decipher and declare my thinking.

Writing field notes helped me be as present as I could in the phenomenon (by means of the research process and participants' transcripts) and capture my own thinking, since, as Clarke (2009) suggests, my final report must communicate how I arrived at my conclusions. Although not everything in my field notes is included in this report, all contributes in some way to insights about the data and about myself. In this sense, my diarised, reflexive narrative can be likened to McIlveen's (2008) discussion of auto-ethnography, which involves writing about oneself as a researcher-practitioner. Recognising and actively using experiential resonance, signifies how conscious and latent biases are understood, and transparently mitigated for, in IPA work.

However, writers and readers of reflexive narratives need to accept the work is not offering generalisability (Holloway, 2005), and the debate has moved on, with issues of transferability now prominent in the literature (Finlay, 2006; Baillie, 2015). Transferability is applied *by* the readers of research. Distinct from generalisability, transferability is not involved in making broad claims. Rather, readers are invited to find their own associations with research in relation to their own experience. Taking this stance, reflexive accounts are used to stimulate alternative intellectual vistas, for more intense understandings to be acquired through uniquely personal meanings and empathy, which may or may not be applicable in other contexts. The point is that the reader needs enough information to decide for themselves. Smith, Flowers and Larkin additionally contend that 'theoretical generalisability' is possible, whereby the audience, ideally 'assess[es] the evidence in relation to their existing professional and

experiential knowledge' (2009, p. 4). In this respect, the nature of hermeneutic phenomenological enquiry has the potential to develop broader understandings of phenomena, with Wolfinger (2002) arguing for the reader to be shown the 'workings' of the researcher's interpretive process. Correspondingly, my research stance encompasses a responsiveness and genuine inquisitiveness to the participants' lived experience, whilst remaining reflexively alert to my own *lifeworld*. Indeed, Gendlin explains the multiplicity of perspective building as;

Phenomenology has no problem going beyond a single person's private experiencing, because experiencing is inherently an interaction process in a situation with other people and things. What appears is neither internal nor external, neither just private nor just interactional. My situation is not subjective since the others in it are more than I can experience, but neither is it "objective" since my situation does not exist apart from me. (2004, pp.147-148)

My field notes carry a subtext based on Morse and Richards' (2002) assertion that the principles of qualitative research are endowed by methodological purposiveness and methodological congruence, situating my self-appraisal in the research question, data collection, and analysis. I found the construction of field notes as particularly amenable to being simultaneously inside and outside of the research. Keeping hold of immediate appraisals, gnarly thoughts, observations, and reminiscences facilitated my 'working through' muddles and testing of areas of seeming clarity. Scribbles, doodles and a textual narrative, mapped my research journey visually, giving focus to my thoughts in the hermeneutic circle and encouraging interpretations to grow from the 'fore-structures' of my understanding. van Manen talks about this as the 'hermeneutic interview' (1990, p. 98) whereby the interviewer deliberately keeps the questioning open and the interviewee focussed on the phenomenon. In essence, I was taking part in my own, extended 'hermeneutic interview', my field notes providing an inquisitive running commentary between researcher and research. My thinking, reading and writing activities corresponding with van Manen's line of reasoning,

The assumption that needs to be examined is that qualitative (phenomenological) enquiry cannot really be separated from the practice of writing. The more committed we are to seriously qualitative (and less technical) form of inquiry, the more we should resist the temptation to surrender to a view of method that hollows out our understandings and cuts us off from the deeper sources of meaning. (2006, p. 713)

The act of writing enabled me to elaborate fleeting thoughts and teased out new perspectives. Indeed, Polt depicts Heidegger's hermeneutic circle as continually returning to earlier descriptions to form new re-conceptions. In an effort to spell out how this works, a process more akin to a 'spiral' than a 'cycle' is proposed, as each completed cycle 'reaches a deeper

level' (1999, p. 31). In IPA, interpretation begins with the voiced experience being heard, then, through systematic analysis, the researcher may expose 'the more' of the phenomena, making connections to wider sources of literature and evidence (Shaw, 2010a). Consequently, having a good intellectual grip on the ideas surrounding hermeneutics is vital to IPA and is described by Moustakas as:

the art of reading a text so that the intentioned meaning behind appearances are fully understood. (1994, p. 9)

The next part of this chapter represents an ongoing process, in which I added ideas as my data analysis progressed via my internal, hermeneutic conversation. The narrative presented is taken directly from my field note extracts and, to maintain idiographic clarity, reflexive 'echoes' are separated for each participant.

Echoes

DORA

At the end of Step 3 of Dora's transcript analysis, I began to understand what it means to be 'immersed' in the data. Manoeuvring through the descriptive layer belonging to Dora, I moved toward the shared understandings in the transcripts interpretative elements. Progression of this seemingly endless process was signalled by how my conceptual notes resonated with my own personal and professional experience, 'echoes' drift from the data. Exposing my knowledge of the world, my phenomenological insights combined with interpretations of that knowledge; an important realisation, because Heidegger (2010) focuses on 'being', suggesting that we are inextricably linked to the world that we have to make sense of (hermeneutics). We do this via our 'involvement', contained in the concept of inter-subjectivity, and referred to as 'being with'. To 'be with' the data and assist my thinking, I separated the reflexive echoes into Professional Life and Personal Life. I found familiarity in the neutral territory of the professional world, as the rules and conventions of this environment framed my self-appraisal. When getting closer to my personal life, the terrain was more difficult to access, navigate and express, as the parameters are less obvious, but as Smith, Flowers and Larkin identify equally necessary;

At times it may be helpful to draw upon your own perceptions and understandings, in order to sound out the meaning of key events and processes for your participants. (2009, p. 89)

Professional Echoes

Easily locating the source of the experiential sound of Dora's clinical experience, I understood Dora's exhaustion with constantly trying to manage competing (and at times impossible) demands – trying desperately to be '*all things to all people*'. I felt her loneliness as a ward sister as my own managerial experience was a period in my career where I sensed being cut adrift from colleagues who I had previously worked closely with. Realising management was not for me, I looked to find somewhere that I professionally belonged, but Dora found her place and stayed. Instead, it took me ten years to feel that I belonged again professionally.

Unlike Dora, I am an outsider to nursing, nevertheless I have worked closely with nurses, trained with nurses, managed nurses, sat on governing body fitness-to-practice panels for nurses, developed curricula for nurses and have taught nurses, yet I am not a nurse. Dora is a nurse, it is a momentous and unquestionable part of her self-description. Alternatively, my self-description is now less attached to my original (clinical) professional label. I am proud of my Occupational Therapy roots, because my professional life grew from there, but, my relationship with my past career has changed and, finally, I am comfortable about that. The friction tied into my sense of 'not quite being': not quite being a clinician, yet not quite being an academic. My job title is 'academic', although I find it difficult to describe myself as such. Partly because unlike clinical roles, the academic role feels less defined and partly because 'academics' do not feature in my tradition (Gadamer, 2013).

However, Dora is a '*ward sister*', she '*loves*' her job. She takes care of her ward in every sense; environmentally, organisationally, financially, clinically and emotionally. I do not have such strong attachments to my work roles, I enjoy what I do, at the time, but never find it difficult to leave or move on. For Dora, work and social life are inherently linked, she is part of the 'team' and the 'team' are part of her life. The sense of fluidity to my professional identity counters Dora's permanency, although as our conversation progressed, Dora gave the impression that was changing; the course had brought about unexpected options to the way she could fulfil her role as a nurse.

Personal Echoes

Dora spoke of her personal life in the context of her parents and siblings, specifying that she did not come from an 'academic' family, but it was her words 'hated school' that suddenly carried me back to my own unhappy first year. However, with the help of a new teacher, I learnt to enjoy school. Dora continued to battle with academia, while I embraced it because of

what it could offer me. These examples show the unpredictability of reflexivity. One comment from Dora and I am a child again, thinking about my assumptions as I grew up. Without warning, thoughts and feelings rattle, leaving me to decide to either ignore or to examine what surfaces. As an IPA researcher looking into Dora's world, I had to accept and hold my own position. By taking on the challenge of my own topsy-turvy reminiscences and un-checked assumptions, I self-evaluated my thinking and interpretations. I was reminded of Nagel's (1974) conviction that all views originate from somewhere, be it near or far, comfortable or uncomfortable. In terms of my own experience, I had to see where my view is coming from.

The echoes from the data stay rumbling around me. Dora's data made me dig into my own worldview. Starting with the familiar sounds of my professional experience, I listened carefully to the discord in my personal world. To understand interpretively, I had to unpick intellectual obstructions and accustomed resonances between myself and the 'other'. Only by dealing with data reflexively was I able to offer a finished account that imaginatively and thoroughly uses the gift presented by the participants.

CATE

My full time job and hectic family-life offered a welcome cognitive and emotional break from my analytic work; providing a necessary gap to step back before I could move forward. Freeing myself from Dora's data by drafting out my 'echoes' (Sub-Step 3b), I put aside the excitement of initial discoveries to 'hear' Cate in her own terms, as opposed to comparisons with Dora (that was for later). Cate's data is a fresh opportunity for learning. I sensed a mix of trepidation and the promise of what is to be found and personal 'barriers' and 'concealments' soon crowded my thinking. Something was different: I was different. Unlike the work with Dora, where my thoughts fluttered around the data, I felt laboured and heavy, becoming increasingly conscious of the lack of parity between efforts exuded and outcomes achieved. The analysis was more difficult, countering my initial thoughts because I was employing a tried and tested method. I thought the novelty and nervousness of the first analysis would clear the way for a more insightful route of travel, in practice, this was not the case. Although I knew 'the how' of engaging with the data, and was no less intrigued or grateful for the data, I encountered an offputtingly altered experience. I questioned if this was just me, or if other researchers experienced this dip. Looking back to the literature, I discovered in Huff's description of his initial IPA journey, he too found the data analysis for his second participant more challenging, recalling that reading the transcript seemed 'mundane' (2014, p. 1624). Not necessarily using his terms, I felt acutely aware of the amount of work ahead to do 'justice' to Cate's gift of data,

one that clashed with my full-time work and family needs. I was torn by time, rather than by lacking interest. My difficulty with Cate's transcript was about me, not the data: my world as opposed to my insights into hers.

I struggled for some time, but the auditable overtones of my 'clinical' experience materialised and I 'rolled with the resistance'. Rather than forcing or closing the interaction with the data, I stayed with the challenge and waited. Instead of time being the source of tension, it became the mediator of change. Going back to the process of my analysis, I worked with the transcript bit-by-bit. Yet the descriptive elements seemed awkward because of the discordant dialogue and without my commitment to thoroughness, I might have skipped Steps 2 and 3. However, my intellectual discipline, which without this experience I might not have noticed, ensured that the analytical task remained grounded in the methodological assumptions of IPA, as portrayed by Smith, Flowers and Larkin;

These understandings of the things which matter to the participant (the key objects, events, experiences in the participant's lifeworld) are often highlighted by description, assumptions, sound bites, acronyms, idiosyncratic figures of speech and emotional responses. (2009, p. 84)

Professional Life

Cate and I entered our professions via separate routes. When Cate's predominantly vocational, initial training ended, she took a break from her nursing career to raise her family, re-entering the profession as a mature learner through a return to nursing course, staying regionally in one service area. In contrast, at 18 years old, I began a BSc (Hons) Occupational Therapy, 200 miles from home. Once over, I moved to London for five years, returning to East Anglia to be nearer family. However, our clinical paths cross in Cate's dialogue about working with carers. Here I returned to my own memories of working with families of people diagnosed with severe and enduring mental illnesses. Often dealing with high levels of psychological distress, uncertainty and anger, my role was challenging as many questions simply could not be answered, but I could listen, I could be consistent, I could be patient and, most of all, I could be present in their distress. I am left wondering about these filed-away recollections, and how much of these experiences filters into my approach to my academic role without me realising.

Personal Life

Unlike classroom settings, where clues are picked up about social circumstances, in distance learning there are few tell-tale signs. For me, technology-assisted communication seems more focused toward specific academic aims rather than being set in a wider social context. For example, prior to the interview, I actually knew little of Cate's personal situation other than she is a single parent with two teenage children.

At interview, Cate's personal world opened up as she told of her continually supportive family, giving examples of how her daughter would leave encouraging notes around her house. She felt the pride of her parents and children at her graduation, and the event was a family celebration of her success. However, in these reminiscences, I realise that I am capturing a story as it is told today. Cate's engagement with academia was not always positive, and her experience as a distance learner, therefore, is a sub-plot in a much bigger story line. Where previously I recognised Cate as a learner, following our conversation I now see her as a mother, daughter, practitioner, and an 'achiever'. These impressions elicit echoes of my own self-based definition and the changes occurring during my doctoral journey. According to Gadamer, understandings of how we define ourselves and others form from who we are now, and where we come from because, 'Understanding is, essentially, a historically effected event' (2013, p. 310). Previously, my lack of confidence overshadowed the labels I gave to myself, whereas now, I am more receptive to self-based descriptions of 'courage', 'determination', and 'ingenuity'. Hence, as Cate illustrates, perceptions stay the same, unless actively moved along through opportunity, experience and reflection.

BEN

The methodology of IPA allows me to 'breathe in' as well as view the data. When I trust and apply the methodology, I can safely allow the data to move off the page and move toward my being. I am able to take control of this migration and transition by remaining reflexively aware, sifting through what belongs to the participants, what belongs to me and, what we share. For example, the sound of Ben's interview swiftly tells of our geographical and cultural differences. His tone, tempo, and timbre are quite unlike mine, his accent, smooth but deliberate. Each word is a carefully crafted composition of syllables allowing me time to attend to what is being said. Matters of additional significance and audibly elevated, punctuating the melody of his narrative. There is no haste or hurry as Ben carefully informs me of his insights and experiences. Dialogical efficacy in this sense takes precedence over didactic expediency.

Whilst I heard the difference, I felt the similarities. The notion of 'care' draws us together. Care for our families and care for our work melded our disparate histories making it difficult to separate out the professional and the personal echoes. 'Caring' encompasses who Ben is at home and at work; he is a 'caring man'. Until beginning my EdD course, or indeed this phase of data analysis, I had taken for granted the 'caring' features of my life. Like Ben, I inhabit a home environment, where care is unconditionally offered and received, in practical and emotional terms. So much of my existence is caring for and being cared about, that it is like 'seeing air'. I just know care exists, there is no need to question. When it comes to 'care' in a professional capacity, Ben and I come from divergent angles. Ben's role demands skilful attendance to the intimate, day-to-day, physical and psychological needs of his residents. Whereas I attend to the intellectual and affective needs of people I never meet and know little about. My tutorial role was something I did, so it just was, making me question how I 'view' my role in distance learning. Whilst Ben's residents and my students obviously differ, they all have individual needs.

Ben has certainty about his role and his career, he knows where he is going and where he fits in the world of caring. I have no certainty and I remain pondering. I've never really thought of my 'work life' as on a career path. I find my way into jobs, or rather, jobs seem to have found me. With no plan, ambition is personally troublesome, although I admire drive in others. My aspiration is 'stability' and to a certain extent, this is likewise the case for Ben. His career progression is based on wanting to do the 'best' he can for his family. Indeed, he is thinking carefully about the consequences of where his career may take him professionally and geographically, with the ensuing possibility of relocation for his family. I am reminded of a phrase in one of my daughter's favourite, childhood books,

The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you'll go. (Geisel, 1978, p. 27)

Another family-based similarity is in Ben's recollection of how his young daughter began to 'study' with him. She would gather her books and they would do 'their' homework together. He was her 'academic' role-model. I experienced this as well, with my daughter, but had not given meaning to the event. At a young age, she would come and sit quietly with me as I worked, leafing through the pages of her books, waiting patiently for me to stop and share the joy of the crunching, munching caterpillar or whatever the favourite of the week was. Ben helped me to see study at my home as a sharing, rather than a separating event. My guilt at spending hours alone in front of my computer, dissipated as a result of the unspoken respect and understanding we have for each other. Such learning through the 'double hermeneutic' shows

that with attention, thoughts are accessed to uncover insight compatible with Heidegger's idea of the gateway to philosophical understanding opening via self-awareness.

Likewise, for Ben, self-awareness occurred as his approach to 'care' progressed; no longer is he a purely 'reactive' practitioner. I understand this change. Before completing my psychosocial (clinical) training, I too had routine strategies for managing clinical work. Often the strategies did not work, because the situations which I found myself in were too complex for linear thinking. My new understanding gave me clinical flexibility or, as Dewey states, 'thought affords the sole method of escape from purely impulsive or purely routine action' (2011, p. 14). Ben, too, passed through this liminal space. He not only met, but exceeded what Meyer and Land (2005) describe as a threshold concept. Ben discovered a path through previously inaccessible ways of thinking. He moved beyond university-prescribed learning outcomes to find a way of problem solving, requiring evaluation of the views of others, to generate 'supported' conclusions. Ben's meaning is to '*research*', where others might use the terms clinical reasoning or problem solving. Most importantly, he has the ability to question. Ben is no longer led by answers but by questions, which he has translated into his own (new) routine practice and the practice of others. Progressing from care provider to care leader because he now has the tools to manage complexity, he is enthused by sharing his new knowledge. Whilst I am full of angst, Ben found confidence in himself.

Ben wanted to share his story and give something back to an educational process that, in his mind, has given to him. His answers were very detailed, considered and clear, resulting in a sense of having a 'necessity of place' within the research. I am reminded again and again of his comment about participating research '*because it is important*'. Ben wanted his empowered voice heard: learning had given him the freedom to be curious, and this curiosity is now supported by a 'workable' and sharable structure. I needed to learn from Ben. I had to find the confidence to verbalise my thoughts, share my inquisitive methodology, and ultimately have a voice in the research community.

ADAM

Initially, Adam and I share more similarities than differences; we have worked in similar clinical services and both take opportunities to learn. Adam clarified how our learning experiences change us, the temporal frame never static. Just as Adam 'moved on' in terms of his thinking, so have I. Throughout his learning experience, new insights emerged about himself and his practice, just as I am doing right now. As we move forward, we cannot go back – we cannot

unlearn as Dewey states; 'Every experience is a moving force. Its value can be judged only on the ground of what it moves toward and into' (1997, p. 31). This strikes a chord with an extract from my field notes;

Since beginning my data analysis, I have swum further and further into the sea of hermeneutic phenomenology, where previously I had just dipped my toes. I am so far in, that I am struggling to see the shoreline of my previous understanding, as new horizons come into view. The waves of new insights sometimes crash over me, almost so violently that I realise I am holding my breath. Other times, the wind is against me, my body and brain aching with my failing attempts to get to grips with the notions swirling around me and I want to get back onto safe, steady, land again. However, there are times when the water is warm and lulling, giving buoyancy and letting me float in my new-found familiarity of thought.

As I allowed myself to drift deeper into Adam's data, I noticed how once near, familiar and unquestioned landmarks became hazy and remote. Adam's data was the last to be subjected to steps 1-3 of analysis, and again I was not able to anticipate my course of travel, because I was reliant on the prevailing conditions produced by his words. At the start, despite my three previous encounters of this part of the data analysis phase, I felt strangely less secure in my ability to stay afloat cognitively, as I made my way into the data, now knowing the time, effort and energy the activity demands. I am grateful to cling to the structure of IPA, as it offers me initial direction and a cerebral compass to navigate this expanse of words. However, I agree with Smythe *et al.* that IPA data analysis is in constant motion, like the sea: a seemingly predictable ebb and flow of description and interpretation that can swirl into an emotive storm with a turn of words, or I can find myself motionless as the idea-carrying wind suddenly drops;

to be human, to be a researcher who lives life as articulated by Heidegger is always to be in-the-midst of a specific situation that is constantly in flux. (2008, p. 1390)

Consequently, I was in an intellectual state of perpetual motion. Sometimes, I made steady headway, at other times, my progress slowed, but nonetheless, somehow moved. My bearings often changed, as I felt myself being pulled back by my novice status. The tradition of phenomenology is so complex, that I could become overwhelmed and not know where to turn. I realised that I was 'teaching myself' about hermeneutic phenomenology. I did not have the academic guides Adam had for his BSc. My doctoral journey was exclusively mine. I did have expert researcher companions, encouraging me to swim further, experience more, and become robust among the unpredictable qualitative conditions. I knew that the wave of self-doubt carried me, but I had better awareness of when to 'kick harder', creating new channels for my thinking and actions as described by Harman;

We find ourselves delivered into a situation that must be dealt with somehow (past). Yet we are not mere slaves to this situation, since we go to work on our current situation by glimpsing possibilities in it that we can try to actualize (future). Finally, every moment of factual life is a profound tension between what is given to us and how we confront it (present). Life is a kind of unrest, forever torn between the poles of reality. Life is movement, or motility. (2007, p. 29)

Like Adam, I made discoveries about myself at the same time as learning about others. Adam's motivations manifest in the context of the here-and-now. He tells of his hope to be a role model for his children, to have intellectual equity with his wife, to make his mother proud and, to do the best he can as a mental health nurse. Adam's history is only briefly referred to; his dialogue is based in the present, hinting at his historical context, but firmly future facing. Adam is fixed in his future and not his past, whilst I am often held back by my traditions. Rather than attempting to sever the bond with my history, I am working toward gaining new intellectual skills to modify the knots of my past, loosening their hold to be able to travel more easily and maintain my authenticity.

Heidegger (2010), views 'authenticity' as finding a different involvement in living, freeing us from everyday anxieties experienced because of habits and routines, so that we are able to face our own finitude. We are released from behaviour that we think we ought to pursue or is a means to an end. Authenticity becomes a way of being in line with our deeper project, making way for a richer experience and a life we choose reflectively. Authenticity is about making choices for ourselves. Adam made choices throughout the course, focusing on subjects relevant to him and his practice. Adam described how the course opened up deeper, unexpected outcomes about himself and how he connects with others. From a Heideggerian standpoint, Adam challenged his beliefs of 'inauthenticity'. Inauthenticity refers to constant absorption within the accepted, unquestioned demands of the present. It is a non-reflective existence, where self-created integration with the world does not occur. The outcome is that we potentially lose ourselves, because we follow others and never question who we (ourselves) are. Inauthenticity arises in this way from a lack of curiosity.

As Adam's knowledge progressed, he became more curious and less accepting (more knowledge-able). Wanting to share his curiosity, he took questions back into practice. Uncertain of the outcome or the consequence, he was undeterred. Developing confidence and rehearsing his questioning skills, he was able to break away from the routines of clinical practice. He could no longer tolerate 'following' without querying. Adam's BSc experience, did not provide him with answers, instead he developed, for himself the ability to question. Equally, learning from my research, I no longer presuppose the conventions of my thinking. Whilst

conceding there are no definite answers as Smythe *et al.*, suggest, I will think more critically about myself and my practice;

Our quest therefore is not to prove or disprove, not to provide irrefutable evidence but rather to provoke thinking toward the mystery of what 'is'. In this way, thinking is 'my' interpretation of coming to understand which is always/already drawn from all of my experiences and conversations (reading, writing, thinking and dialogue) with others. (2008, p. 1391)

Chapter Summary

The literature surrounding IPA makes many references to the process of reflexivity (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009; Shaw, 2010b). My own experiences and observations of the data, combined with the phenomenological philosophy of IPA, creates a multi-dimensional approach to my interpretative work (Finlay, 2011). Intellectual creativity inspired through cognitive and affective motion in and around the data, opens new vantage points to see, and I now understand 'hear', the evolving story. 'Thus, qualitative method is often difficult, as it requires sensitive interpretive skills and creative talents from the researcher' (van Manen, 2006, p. 720). To understand one aspect, Smith Flowers and Larkin (2009) suggest researchers must survey the whole, and to understand the whole, the researcher must identify and examine the constituent parts.

Thoughts and recollections cannot be presumed to be 'on tap', but conversely memories can appear without invitation. Recall and recollection is predictably unpredictable, an idiosyncratic quality. However, from a Heideggerian point of view, what joins us all is that what is presented, is an impression of what has gone before, because time has moved on and so have we. Experiences get caught up in other experiences, time frames become jumbled. Our past, becomes a place where we have to re-attend, but we look from a new perspective, the perspective offered in the light of what is happening now. Layered within these perspectives are concealments and personal barriers, those unique features that either hold us back, or propel us forward: the known and unknown; the shared and kept to ourselves. Consequently, the experience of keeping intensive field notes displays van Manen's (2006) proposition of the bond between phenomenological investigation and the researcher's own engagement with writing. Writing necessitated me finding words to express my thoughts, making a conversation between my inner world thinking and external expression possible.

As my reflexive insights became clearer, I could ask more knowledgeable questions of the participant's narrative. Consequently, my position as the central analytic instrument demanded that I continually ask myself, if I am remaining faithful to the participants' gifts of data in order to demonstrate my credibility and authenticity within the interpretative frame. Furthermore, reflexivity stimulates critical self-appraisal, ensuring that I explore my own alternative explanations of insights and promoting integrity as a phenomenological analyst. To repeatedly observe the data from this double aspect view is illustrative of the 'double hermeneutic' (Smith & Osborn 2008, p. 51) and accentuates the duality of the interpretation. This initially involved the participants interpreting their experience (meaning-making), then moved to my researcher's interpretations of the story (sense-making) in Chapter 7. It is this 'human connection' which I believe makes IPA relevant for understanding more about my research question. I now see that the philosophical basis and the research application of interpretive phenomenology provides access to otherwise hidden experiences of distance learning. With a better understanding of what happens for a small group of distance learners, a new type of educational conversation may start, which is more directed toward the individual rather than the technological components of this mode of educational delivery. To gain a deeper hermeneutic view, my study progresses in Chapter 7 through an interpretative lens.

Chapter 7: Interpretative Analysis — The view from the ground, exploring the themes

Introduction

The first component of Step 6, identifying cross-case patterns is provided in Chapter 5. In this chapter, I present the second component of Step 6, finding deeper levels of interpretation, along with the methods I used to confirm my interpretations. My exploration of interpretative meanings acts as a response to Smith, Flowers and Larkin's (2009) concern that, 'novice researchers tend to be too cautious, producing analyses that are too descriptive' (2009, p. 103). As I am not aligning myself with the work of Husserl, my interpretive work focuses on the *experience* and I do not attempt to present broad analysis of the ontic essence (i.e. purely the description of what is there). More exactly, my interest is in the subjective experience and not the properties of distance learning itself. Viewing the experience from the participants' perspective (empathetic stance), combined with knowledge and understanding of psychological and phenomenological literature now broadens the scope of my interpretations (Finlay, 2008). To preserve the idiographic approach (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009), the participant experience is kept intact by using verbatim extracts and the collective voice supports my overarching, interpretive treatment of the transcripts. Vitally, my analytic interpretations are woven in the fabric of the raw data (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p. 110).

The hermeneutic phenomenology of Heidegger, Gadamer and Merleau-Ponty inspired my analytic work, maintaining my fidelity to IPA. From an educational stance, I have explored the humanistic psychology of Carl Rogers as this is consistent with the subjective understanding rooted in the phenomenological thinking of Heidegger, Gadamer and Merleau-Ponty (Schneider, Pierson & Bugental, 2015). Humanistic psychologists assume people uniquely perceive and understand their world to make sense of the things they do (Elias & Merriam, 2005). Indeed, Veugelers (2011) remarks that the humanistic tradition has fallen from favour in higher educational discourse, there are calls for learners to be at the centre of their higher educational experience (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010; BIS, 2011; Sharman, 2014).

With humanistic ideals in mind and in taking a similar approach to my data analysis, my interpretative work is situated in an ever-shifting temporal frame, in which ideas change and insights apply only to a defined moment, and so my viewpoint cannot be fixed or absolute (Gadamer, 2013). Correspondingly, for Merleau-Ponty (2013), what is *now* is of the moment, and not in the past or the future. Hence, my interpretative outlook is, and can only be mine

alone, so I explain my reasoning in sufficient detail to enable others to follow my ideas (Smythe *et al.*, 2008).

In my interpretative process I used my field notes and NVivo files to create paper-based, diagrammatic representations of my thinking and extend my comprehension of the master themes (see Chapter 5). The diagrams allowed me to visualise organize my ideas. Initially neat and linear, the diagrams became a messy fusion of scribbled observations, references and connecting lines as I repeatedly stretched and reworked my thinking. Standing back, the diagrams looked like maps, with connecting routes and paths leading nowhere. For example, the area of the VLE was small and isolated, conversely, tutor presence greatly expanded. My visual appraisal identified specific areas to focus my interpretative writing. Using the hermeneutic strategy I first applied in the data analysis process, I continued writing to gain deeper access to the participants' accounts, since as van Manen, suggests:

Qualitative writing may be seen as an active struggle for understanding and recognition of the lived meanings of the lifeworld, and this writing also possesses passive and receptive rhetoric dimensions. It requires that we be attentive to other voices, to subtle significations in the way that things and others speak to us. In part, this is achieved through contact with the words of others. These words need to touch us, guide us, stir us. (2006, p. 1 [emphasis in original])

Step 6 (Second Component): Deeper Levels of Interpretation

My analysis reveals that the term 'distance learning' is a misnomer, the participants described a close and personal learning experience. The geographical distance had a minimal impact when feeling at the centre of their learning, because the individuality of experience resulted in self-noticing (Veugelers, 2011). Thus, self-based change developed as part of a process, not a single, dominant event; resonating with Mezirow & Taylor's (2011) contemporary ideas of transformational learning. My interpretative appraisal is also consistent with Snyder's (2008) argument for more research to analyse the transformative process in place of assessment of whether transformation has happened. So, concentration was directed toward the participants' making-sense within a process of change (Smith, 2007). The issue of subjective change is of interest in hermeneutic phenomenology (Laverty, 2003) and is prominent in humanistic, learner-centred approaches; captured in Rogers's suggestion of the relationship between learning and change;

The only person who is educated is the one who has learned how to learn; the one who has learned how to adapt and change; the one who has realized that no

knowledge is secure, that only the process of seeking knowledge gives a basis for security. Changingness, a reliance on process rather than upon static knowledge, is the only thing that makes any sense as a goal for education in the modern world. (1983, p. 104)

Evidentially, 'learning to learn' is seen to encompass micro-layers of self-noticed change. The layering of experience resonates with Heideggerian thoughts about how phenomena are experienced in a multitude of ways. Therefore, the next part of this chapter focuses on the projection and the production of meaning extracted from the master themes noted in the first component of Step 6. In the following discussion, it is not my intention to objectify and dislodge the phenomena from the individualised accounts (Harman, 2007). Rather, I interpretatively refine my understanding and present practice-orientated, pedagogical tenets. The translation of themes into tenets demonstrates noticeable principles originating from the data. For this reason, both the theme and tenet titles are not suggesting that the same thing has been said repeatedly, instead the vocabulary denotes my insights of the distance learning experience (Smythe *et al.*, 2008) extracted from the data. Each of the five tenets derives from the corresponding theme (e.g. Theme 1 becomes Tenet 1, etc.) as indicated in Table 19. A refined thematic diagram, using the information from Table 17, p.111 which identifies the master themes, sub themes and representation of change is included for each tenet to illustrate the key points of reference.

	Theme	Tenet
1	Attention is needed to be ready to learn, necessitating the refocus of time and existing priorities to concentrate on the self.	Attentive learners are ready to learn and refocus their time and existing priorities to concentrate on the self
2	Acceptance is about viewing the self as a learner by rethinking expectations of self, ability, and opportunity.	Accepting learners see themselves as learners and rethink personal expectations of their abilities and opportunities
3	Accompaniment refers to the learning which occurs from relating to others to validate and challenge thinking.	Accompanied learners are helped to learn and relate to others to validate and change their thinking
4	Adaptation happens through reviewing previous ways of feeling, thinking and doing to evaluate new understandings.	Adaptive learners review previous ways of feeling, thinking, and doing to achieve new understandings
5	Activation is a multi-layered way of using learning by responding with new learning strategies to self and others.	Active learners learning in multi-layered ways and respond with new learning strategies for themselves and others

Table 19: Development of theme to tenet

Tenet 1: Attentive learners are ready to learn and refocus their time and existing priorities to concentrate on the self

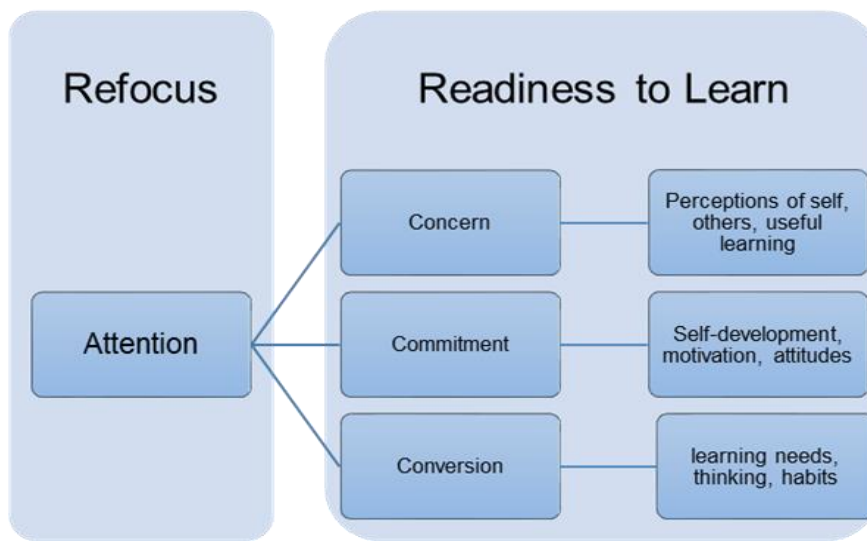


Diagram 6: Representation of key features of Theme 1 in Tenet 1

The participants' descriptions of the learning experience began before the course commenced. Opportunity is a leading factor, not a predominant motivator for them. Their decision to enrol on the course formed through long-held assumptions, generated from lived experiences and a present sense of 'self'. Polkinghorne (2015) categorises 'the self' as an ongoing narrative, contrasted with a set of biological functions or 'things', emphasising temporality as a vivid constituent of human existence. Subsequently, readiness to learn became established through timely and self-noticed reasons. Self-developed readiness to learn is the cornerstone for the adult learning process (Knowles, Swanson & Holton, 2005) and prospective of meaningful learning (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). Previously, research has taken-for-granted that transformational change is encased in 'in-course' time (Taylor & Cranton, 2013) but my interpretative observation indicates a longitudinal process for transformational change, starting before the educational experience. The transformational journey described is more in keeping with Taylor's (2007) proposition that transformation is a multi-factorial, self-noticed phenomena. Merleau-Ponty associates conscious self-noticing with everyday experience. Yet, paradoxically, noticing can be concealed by 'everydayness', without awareness and attention because,

Attention, then is a general and unconditioned power in the sense that it can at any moment indifferently cast its light upon any of the contents of consciousness. (2013, p. 29)

For the participants, attending to the professional-self sparked subjective attention to clinical roles and responsibilities. 'Everydayness' as viewed by Heidegger, refers to the acceptance of day-to-life without reflecting on the meaning of existence because everydayness can be construed as surface-level, self-known information. Adam and Ben wanted to progress their careers, Cate wanted to do a good job, and Dora wanted to stay clinically current. Thus, the opportunity to join a professionally-orientated course provided a means to fulfil their professionally-based, day-to-day aspirations. The assumption gleaned from the participants' language is that learning would be beneficial for themselves and others. The participants' readiness to learn can be seen to be intrinsically driven and concurrently fuelled by altruism (Borrás, 2016). Cate's concern for the self and the interchange with concern for others, is apparent when she said how she, '*wanted to do something useful, something that would help my work*'. Gadamer recognised,

Consciousness is consciousness of something; every relation is in relation to something. (2013, p. 228)

The participants' subjective, situational consciousness stimulated their readiness to learn, (Knowles, Swanson & Holton, 2005; Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2012) tied with self-based information from the past, recognition of the present and matters of the future. In other words, readiness to learn anticipates something being positively different for the self and others after the learning experience, meaning that adult learning is a hopeful pursuit. My perception of learning going beyond the professional-self results from attention moving in the direction of the personal-self. I commented in my field notes; Attention toward the professional self-provided a safe harbour before entering the open waters of developing the personal self.

The aspirational language in the data changed from a work focus to a focus on the self. Adam and Cate wanted to feel as *good* as other people with a degree; Ben wanted to feel *secure*; and Dora wanted to feel that she had *options*. Hence, with regard to self-development, Merleau-Ponty advises perception and attention are symbiotic, stating; 'In order to relate attention to the life of consciousness, it would be necessary to show how a perception awakens attention, and then how attention develops and enriches this perception' (2013, p. 29).

Perceptions of the self as part of a family, social scene, and work, place expectations on the self as an adult learner. Self-based expectations triggered perceptions of the course, as seen in Adam's recollection that '*I knew it was going to be difficult, but I made the decision to develop... once you make that decision then you have to be a hundred percent positive about*

it'. His commitment to self-development formed through attitudinally-based perceptions of responsibilities for the self. Cate recognised this as well, by saying '*this was time for me*'. Commitment is self-directed rather than course-directed, or directed by others. This pedagogic insight has a humanistic orientation, and Rogers (1995) suggests that a naturally occurring self-actualising tendency guides participation, not externally induced demand.

Attending to self-based learning instigated practical and cognitive alteration in participants' routines and habits. They had to be prepared to manage the perceived demands of the course. In the experience of higher education, juggling life roles is a well-documented characteristic of re-entry learners (Merriam & Bierema, 2014; Zawacki-Richter & Anderson, 2014). In the participants' narratives, these multiple and intricate roles and relationships presented barriers to accessing study time or alternatively time for the self. The participants could not be removed from their roles, instead they made space for study in their demanding lives.

Maintaining existing roles and responsibilities while studying required the redefinition, reallocation and reconfiguration of time. Adam's expression of '*protected time*', and Ben's '*homework time*' are examples of how time was converted for study. Observable expressions of how time is used is in behavioural re-configurations of time, fundamentally, conversion is affectively determined. Emotional investment altered priority perspectives leading to action. Self-based attention necessitated individually orientated space, both in the practicalities of life, and in the thinking and affective elements of self-development (Maiese, 2017).

Readiness to learn required standing back from the routines of life to **refocus** attention toward the self. Self-awareness is ever present in our interactions with the world, though our attention varies, depending on the situations we find ourselves in and how open we are to our own awareness (Heidegger, 2010). The prospect of a course that could meet professional-developmental needs and fulfil self-based ambitions to achieve graduate status moved self-awareness into action. Preparation for the course necessitated refocusing, re-prioritising and re-organising; existing, immediate, mid-term and future demands. Self-awareness, enabled embodied control over the planning and approach taken to studying as an adult learner. Each participant set their own scene for the learning, grounded in lifeworld encounters so that the personal groundwork is started before the course commenced.

Tenet 2: Accepting learners see themselves as learners and rethink personal expectations of their abilities and opportunities

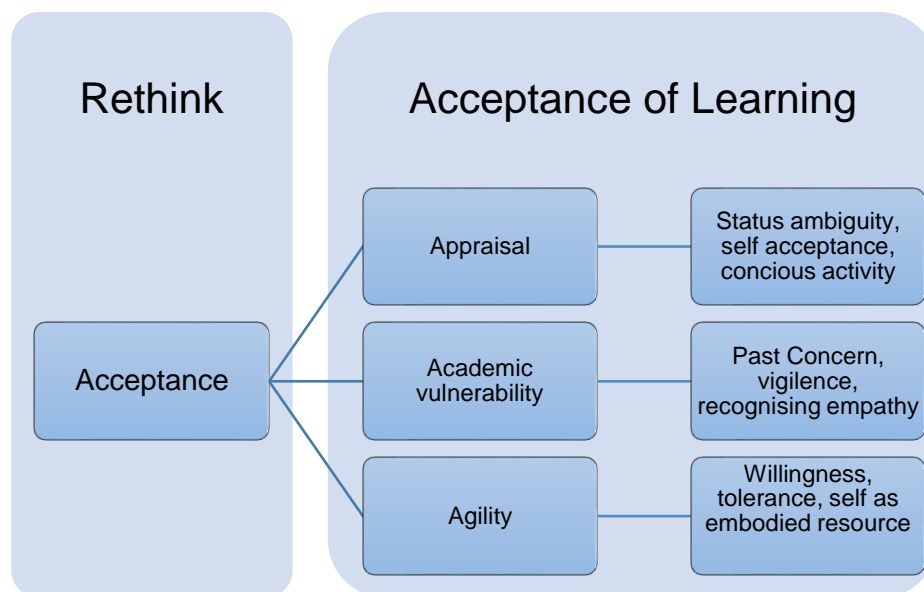


Diagram 7: Representation of key features of Theme 2 in Tenet 2

Re-entry into higher education as qualified, experienced health professionals opened a new chapter in the story of the self for the participants as previously professional education related to their novice clinical status. Equally, this experience blended participants' status as experienced clinicians with that of novice, undergraduate distance learners. The learning context spanned the familiar (i.e. the clinical context of the course) and the unfamiliar (i.e. distance learning and a higher level qualification), evoking status ambiguity. The uncertainty of scholarship brought about a demanding situation which could have been avoided through non-participation or, as seen in the participants' narratives, cognitively and emotionally dealt with through *acceptance*. In psychological terms, *acceptance* is a personal realisation of a situation without trying to defend it, change it or protest.

The participants' pre-reflective reactions indicated their personal attitudes to the learning experience. The concurrent positions of 'experienced clinician' and 'novice distance learner' triggered negative appraisals or beneficial realisations. For example, Cate's emotional reflex response to uncertainty triggered thoughts and feelings associated with low self-confidence. Dora's response to challenge was, '*I'm not academic*', which she used to distance herself from discomfort. Conversely, when Adam '*let in*' academic support, his emotional reflex arc lengthened, and a space opened between the emotional reaction and action (or inaction); thinking could be re-framed and re-thought. Ben shows his acceptance of his situation when

describing how he, '*stopped thinking my tutor would think bad of me for not knowing*'. Trust in the tutorial process influenced Adam's acceptance of '*not having to know*'. Supportive tutor presence extinguished fears of *not knowing*, giving as Dora put it permission to, '*have a go*'. For Polkinghorne (2015), *acceptance* is acceptance of the self as a learner and acceptor of help. This attitudinal shift is synonymous with Rogers and Freiberg's take on self-acceptance from both learner and tutor perspectives:

we cannot change, we cannot move away from what we are, until we thoroughly *accept* what we are. Then change seems to come about almost unnoticed. (1994, p. 17 [emphasis in original])

Acceptance resolved the distance gap, bringing the participants closer to their own learning via proximity to support. Furthering this observation, Halling notes that,

the intrinsic distance amongst us also serves as a connection that draws us together. (2009, p. 30)

Appraisal

Acceptance featured in the participants' continuing appraisals of self, and relationships with tutors, in respect to past encounters with formal learning (school, post school courses). Contact with tutors stimulated self-based appraisals of perceived academic abilities, resulting in a range of affective and cognitive reactions. Cate frequently contacted her tutors because she '*wanted to know how to do well*', and in contrast, Ben never told of his angst of failing. Tasks set by the tutors offered participants an opportunity to appraise their progress, Dora, for example, '*didn't think I was going to ever be able to find my way around the VLE but I did*', and Ben, '*was glad I got some feedback early on about my academic writing*'. Self-appraisal raised self-awareness through reflection of the learning events recognised by Merleau-Ponty, who argued that,

Reflection is not absolutely transparent for itself, it is always given to itself in an experience... it always springs forth without itself knowing from whence it springs, and always offers itself to me as a gift of nature. (2013, p. 45)

Phenomenologically, reflective appraisal is the subjective replay of an experience (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2012). If *I* am the one who has had the conscious experience, then only *I* can appraise my perceptions. This interpretative reasoning views reflection as a self-based appraisal of a conscious activity. Pre-reflective or unconscious events cannot be reflected

upon until they are made conscious (Merleau-Ponty, 2013). Finlay (2008) suggests that reflection consciously and deliberately inspects our everyday assumptions and enables new understandings. This is clear in learning triumphs, (e.g. when Adam said, '*I realised, yep, that makes sense*'), as well as learning challenges. Dora used the tangible experience of overcoming initial difficulties with the VLE to develop self-understanding:

I thought here we go, this is just typical of me, but when I spoke to my tutor, I realised that by looking I had found other things, I just needed some patience with myself.

Dora accepted the review of her self-imposed expectations affectively, illustrating how self-appraisal raises awareness of learner development set against academic content acquisition. The potential for distance learning to result in learning autonomy has been debated in the literature for many years. In my study, learning autonomy developed because of the distance element. The learners had to work things out for themselves, other people were not available in the immediate vicinity for observational learning to occur. Learning in this context uses cognitive methods of trial and error (as with Dora) or a more systematic process of following instruction (as with Adam). Paul suggested the criteria for establishing the success of distance learning related primarily to learner independence, stating,

The ultimate challenge... is to develop each individual's capacity to look after his or her own learning needs. (1990, p. 37)

Academic Vulnerability

Defining and meeting one's own learning needs can be bewildering in any mode of education. Learning exposes us to hidden, yet familiar, aspects of ourselves that we may embrace or retreat from, because learning removes the cover of the mundane. In the acknowledgement that learning is needed, acceptance is required that in some way, we are 'in need' (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). Learning moves us into a liminal state; a place between the known and unknown (Meyer & Land, 2005). I interpreted this instability as academic vulnerability, a specific type of vulnerability, originating from participants' earlier learning experiences where concerns from the past signal negative vigilance to present educational encounters. Through interpretative observation academic vulnerability manifested in emotional responses, influencing thinking and, transmitted through behaviour. Academic vulnerability, initiated over-exposure in Cate's case, where '*I tried everything*' or, under exposure for Dora, where '*I didn't look at the emails*'. The type and level of participation resulted from affectively driven concerns and not necessarily time-based issues. Even though Cate had limited time, she managed her

learning anxiety by doing more than expected. Conversely, for Dora, opening emails subjected her to potential discomfort by confirming academic uncertainty.

Academic vulnerability is associated in the data with:

- impact of former learning on assumptions about ability
- newness of the mode of education delivery, lacking tacit knowledge
- physical distance and new type of effort needed for communication
- potential for 'out of sight, out of mind' from tutors, getting lost in the virtual world
- negated individual uniqueness and diversity due to the lack of observed social nuance.

Academic vulnerability hid in participants' anxieties about their perceptions of progress, ability and, outcome, with all three related to their sense of being '*good enough*', as Adam put it. The vocabulary for academic vulnerability is difficult to articulate because of the tacit nature of the feelings. Merriam and Bierema construe this as,

It is knowing without reasoning and transcends the cognitive. It is knowing that we experience rather than think about. (2014, p. 130)

Cate shows the difficulty of translating affect into words when she says, '*I don't know, it was, it was just really, really hard, I can't really explain it better than that*'. And, Adam observed, '*I don't know how to put it, you could say it was frustrating but it was more than that*'. These subjective experience examples convey Polanyi's observation that, 'we know more than we can tell' (1967, p. 4). Words are the primary source of communication in distance learning as information is not derived from physical cues. Connections to support are interrupted when affective experiences cannot be translated verbally, triggering academic vulnerability.

However, a more positive perspective of academic vulnerability emerges when past learning experiences and '*not knowing*' (Ben's words) are accepted to mediate expectations of the 'self' in the present. In other words, accepting that education is about learning, learning is about discovery, as Snowber identifies,

I am more interested in what I don't know than what I know. I already know what I know, but how can I be surprised by being fully awake. (2012, p. 123)

Agility

Cognitive agility is a concept associated with the study of management and leadership. The term describes people who are adaptable, open to new ideas, and can accept ambiguity (Good & Yeganeh, 2012). My interpretation of cognitive agility is apparent through increasing tolerance to uncertainty and self-directed willingness to explore the unknown, as Ben commented, '*I thought to myself, I have to do something different here*', and Adam's realisation that, '*this was a different way of thinking about my practice*'. When difference was no longer feared, but embraced, subjective acceptance of learning included the self as an embodied resource for learning (Knowles, Swanson & Holton 2005; Snowber, 2012) with cognitive agility involving more than acquiring new information. Mezirow's comment that 'habits of mind are more durable than points of view' (1978, p. 6) indicating how the subject matter of a point of view has greater susceptibility to change than how we arrive at it. And so, longer term meaning and progression need self-based structures for learning and not simply new information. For example, Dora's assertion that, '*I got excited about learning*' reveals the mystery and potential of unanswered questions as more enticing than her reverting back to rote-learned responses. Allowing the self to experience uncertainty positively exercises affective and cognitive agility to examine issues from multiple perspectives, as Ben pointed out when reconsidering his previously unquestioned knowledge through recognising thinking habits:

In the first part of the course I was more interested in answers... more interested to hear whether you were on the right track or not, but as time progressed the questions became more and more of what do you think about this yourself? Do you think you can do this differently? If so, how are you going to do it? So, you know they became provocative questions to the questions that I raised myself as a student.

Learning to learn necessitated choice-driven participation to rethink expectations of the self, ability, and opportunity. Gadamer states that 'being present' does not imply attending,

To be present means to participate. If someone was present at something, he knows all about how it really was. (2013, p. 127)

The participants' professional roles, self-identities, and past educational experiences provided the basis to re-assess their closely held thinking. Meanwhile, their routine roles became attended to more willingly than participated in. As autonomous practitioners, they found themselves in a position of rethinking approaches to learning and became more present in themselves. Halling (2009) identified that to experience we have to acknowledge exasperation and disillusionment (in ourselves and in others) because these features assist us to recognise and respond to renewal and contentment. In my interpretative reasoning, rethinking consisted

of an alternating emphasis on matters of personal significance, evidencing validation, and assumptions about clinical certainty. The alternating focus corresponded with looking at past experiences, their current situation, and projections for the future. In this way, learning is not restricted to the degree award, but an identifiable part of a lifelong process.

Tenet 3: Accompanied learners are helped to learn and relate to others to validate and change their thinking

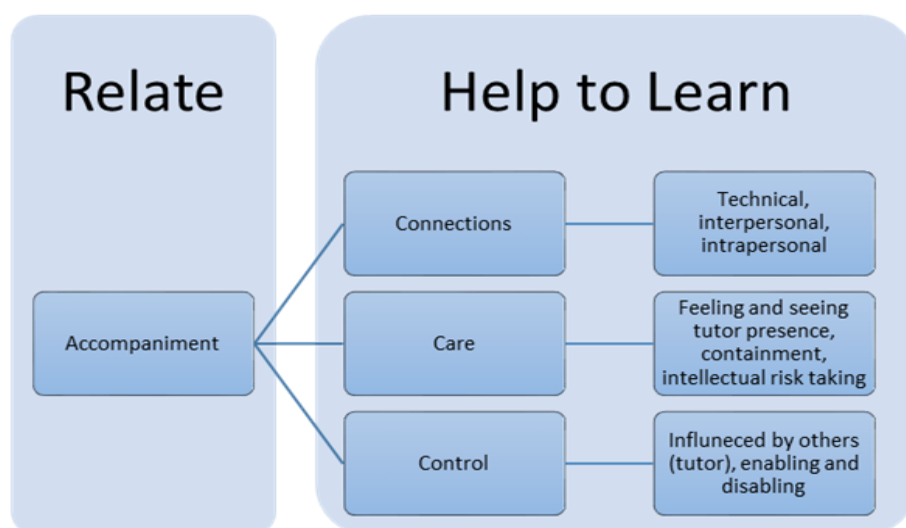


Diagram 8: Representation of key features of Theme 3 in Tenet 3

My interpretations view the presence of others as important in the experience of distance learning. Unlike previous research where social connection is prioritised (Ingirige & Goulding, 2009; Robb & Sutton, 2014), my work is more suggestive of Cleveland-Innes and Campbell's (2012) findings related to emotional connection, where feelings of 'being with' prevails over the demonstration of physical presence. The affective appraisal of the distance learning tutors featured heavily in the verbal accounts, capturing my interpretative gaze. For Heidegger, the term 'Others', interchanges with the phrase 'the they' (*das Man*), as he explained,

By 'Others' we do not mean everyone else but me – those over against whom the 'I' stands out. They are rather those from whom, for the most part, one does not distinguish oneself – those among whom one is too... By reason of this with-like Being-in-the-world, the world is always the one that I share with others. (2010, pp. 154-5)

In the midst of the participants' words, the tutors stood out as the 'others', bridging the gap between the VLE and embodied experiences of learning. Proximal terms are used in the data to describe tutor presence, and tutors with closer proximity shared similar, egalitarian goals

as the participants. The language described tutors with whom connection was difficult as more distant, with their own self-focused, elitist goals. Perceptions of proximity are not geographically founded, but are, in fact, the distance between perceptions of ideologies. Likewise, person-centred connections (self-to-self) and person-to-person connections (self-to-others) are central to these interpretive findings, all aligning with three connotations of distance learning connection;

- i) Technical (Dora: *I had some problems getting onto the system*)
- ii) Intrapersonal (Ben: *Yeah, I thought I've got it, I understand*)
- iii) Interpersonal (Cate: *I just got on with that tutor really well*).

Technical Connections

The mandatory elements of the distance learning course included technology-based access to the course, the course content, course-based communication, and assignment submission. Crucially, connection with the technology-facilitated participation element of the learning experience brought convenience in terms of time flexibility (not having to travel, having everything, as Adam said, '*in one place*'), and choice (about how, when, and with whom to communicate). These features distinguish this course from past learning experiences, setting it apart for the participants; moreover, use of the technology itself tested academic confidence. However, according to Heidegger (2011) when attention is placed solely on what technology can do, we, the users of technology become blind to the threat of it. In this sense, rather than technology objectifying the learning and replacing people, connecting to the technology with a sense of meaning and purpose opened up a new space for learning and engagement with people they never physically met and resources they never physically touched.

Intrapersonal Connections

Distance learners, studying by themselves only see their own reflection in the computer screen. What they view in the learning world is determined by what is seen in the self (Rogers, 1995). In this way, accompaniment comes from the outside world, initiated via engagement and interaction with technology. The concern to minimise isolation is prevalent in the distance learning literature (Garrison, 2011, Haythornthwaite & Andrews, 2011: Zawacki-Richter & Anderson, 2014). Contrary to this unease, and despite opportunities to share with peers, in my study I saw the learners relishing the freedom and space of independent learning.

Aloneness and, importantly, the choice for when to be alone in learning, was both sought and protected. To step outside of their usual, people-filled worlds, and focus if only briefly on themselves, was viewed by each participant as advantageous to their self-learning. Intrapersonal consideration aroused what Dora termed '*time out*', enabling concentration without distraction. Momentarily, the participant's attention on a single activity aided connection with the self, before reconnecting with others.

Interpersonal Connections

Through connections with their tutors, the participants developed learner independence and not dependence. Tutors were aware of the cognitive, affective, and physical impacts of distance learning (Garrison, 2011) and mostly provided a supportive online atmosphere that promoted learner ownership of the process. A pattern of ownership is evidenced through the nature of asynchronous contact. This encourages learners to work to their own schedules, giving choice over how and when to communicate. In this way, decision-making establishes tangible components of learner-control, boosting agency and self-appraisal. Dialogue with the self, influences dialogue with others because of the time gap. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty suggests that, 'We indubitably communicate with ourselves by communicating with the world' (2013, p. 448). The lack of spontaneity became an asset as communications needed consideration before action was taken. The participants could engage with their own curiosity before conveying their thoughts to others. In Heideggerian terms 'own-ness' (*Eigentlichkeit* – suggestive of integrity and authenticity) indicates that an experience is bound to ever-evolving questions of the meaning of the self and furthermore existence.

Due to the presence of self, online communication is fragile and, as with face-to-face interaction, relies on a mutual understanding of the cognitive, affective, and behavioural consequences of each other's engagement (or lack thereof). My interpretation signals the participant narrative as wanting *distance learning* tutors and not *distant* tutors to position learning at the centre of interaction. Such thinking matches with Ben's positive connections with his tutors, and Dora's revision of her assumptions of academic support saying, '*I couldn't believe how helpful they were*'. In contrast, Adam and Cate reported tutor difficulties on a number of levels, including a lack of affective connection, poor understanding of interaction outcomes, and non-contact.

In distance learning, synchronous conversation can occur in telephone communications or video conferencing and asynchronous, text-based conversations have a time-delay. However,

regardless of method, dialogical exchange is happening because words are not objects to be physically grasped, nor do they drift remotely, waiting to be discovered. Technology only provides a way to share words, the words themselves belong to us. We feel as well as cognitively interpret 'words' and so our words and communication style are important because language helps us to form knowledge through interaction with ourselves and the world (Heidegger, 2011). In the context of distance learning, Adams states,

Technology-mediated conversations—whether they transpire synchronously or asynchronously, across the hall or across the ocean—are real, palpable and have an effect. (2014, p. 60)

Using technology does not remove the person from the communication, yet a puzzling and perhaps subtle tension is created between our presence and simultaneous absence. To add further confusion, assumptions can arise from the ingrained nature of our embodied pre-conceptions in face-to-face physical presence is the same as togetherness. However, online and face-to-face communication both expose pre-judgements and current understandings, encapsulating Gadamer's metaphor of the horizon as 'the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point' (2013, p. 143). Hence, our pre-judgements and understandings enable us to get closer to the other person's viewpoint by knowing where we stand because Gadamer (2013) believed interaction is not about consensus building but the enrichment of our horizon 'in that moment' of exchange. In asynchronous distance learning, that 'moment' may not be in the physical presence of another, rather it is part of knowing the presence of another exists as Diagram 9 illustrates.

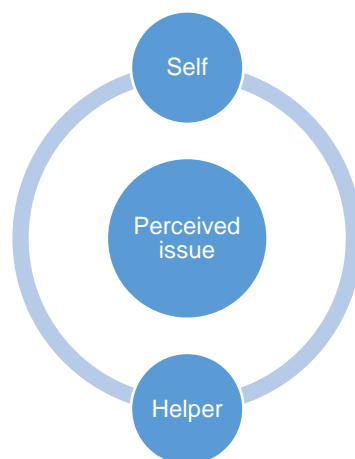


Diagram 9: The relationship of a perceived issue to helper and self

The participants' deliberate and conscious activities for connecting to others and to the online resources are consistently apparent. Even so, to remain affectively safe, strategic approaches

are revealed to find the most effective sources of help. Evaluations of helpfulness knit with Halling's (2009) contention about the affective consequence of a communication testing the mainstay of a relationship. Arguably, relationships between learners and help providers (tutors) aim to reduce the distance between the learner and their learning by bringing the learner and the support closer. Online help-seeking is proactive and intentional, requiring a complex, embodied union of motivation, cognitive processing, and physical action, which, for Adam meant, '*I had to prepare for my study time*', and for Dora was captured when she said, '*I had to make time*'. Online connection requires effort and, for the participants, the perceived positive outcomes propelled as well as determined the efforts made.

Care

Various notions of care are evident in the participant's descriptions of tutor presence. All four participants said something about the caring nature of their learning experience: Adam referred to feeling, '*cared about*'; Ben described his tutors as, '*caring people*'; Cate noted how, '*they really cared about us and the course*', and Dora recalled feeling, '*cared for*'. In these instances, the participants discerned qualities of 'caring' in the tutors' concern and attention. The participant's observations of the tutor role consistently resonate with ideas of an academic caregiver, but significantly this is associated with empowerment rather than creating dependency because the perceived caring actions did not remove or diminish the learner's own responsibility. Instead, the learners were guided to see things in a new or different way. Hence, the evidence suggests care is determined through specific tutor actions coinciding with a positive affective reaction from the learner. As an academic I recognise the importance of tutors possessing practical knowledge (i.e. know how to use the VLE) and subject knowledge (i.e. about the module content and assignment) but incidents of pastoral care were paramount to the participants. In this respect, pedagogical expertise has a substructure of 'people ability' and, when combined, this establishes enablement. It was at the person-to-person level that the participants perceived the tutors to *be with* learning, associating with Gadamer's view,

if two people understand each other independently of any topic, then this means that they understand each other not only in this or that respect, but in all the essential things that unite human beings. (2013, p. 187)

The phenomenon of care is notable in functional features, inherent in the tutoring role (see Diagram 10). Dora's comment that, *'they understood what it was all about'* attached care directly to the learning experience contrasting with a vague emotional experience. By 'caring' the tutors encouraged participants to progress, enhancing feelings of legitimacy and belonging in the VLE, for example, Adam highlighted how feelings of acceptance promoted his intellectual risk-taking when he said *'[the tutor] helped me to go beyond my usual thinking'*, and a key motivator for Dora was that *'no question was ever silly'*. Furthermore, tutorial care provided containment during a time of unsettlement. From a psychological perspective, containment connects to ideas of internal tolerance and building resilience to self-manage uncomfortable thoughts, feelings and behaviours caused by stressful situations (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). In this educational context, tutorial care supported the route toward transformative outcomes.

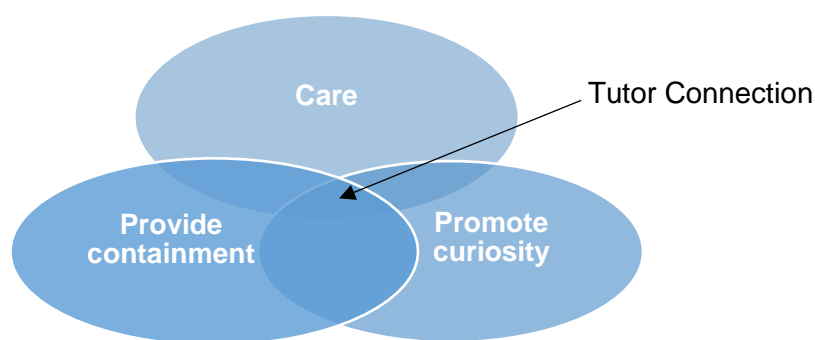


Diagram 10: The tutor's role in promoting learner independence

The participants were previously taught how to deliver care as nurses, in this distance learning context they learnt how to receive and use the care offered for their own self-growth because the tutors simultaneously role modelled academic practice and professional caring. Therefore, Table 20 gives examples of how the participants observed and affectively experienced care.

Observed care	Experience of care
Construction of VLE	Individualised communication
Accuracy in the module documentation	Responsiveness of tutors to learning needs
Speed of tutor response	Tutor empathy
Module team working together	Impression of being valued as a person
Understandable feedback	Focus on self-based learning

Table 20: Subjective experience of care

However, when Adam and Cate struggled to connect with their tutors, they experienced feelings of frustration, confusion, and abandonment. Without perceived care, mutual respect diminished and learning facilitators become learning inhibitors, as seen in Adam's comment '*I don't think she got just how difficult it is when you're a distance learner and you don't get what you are supposed to be doing*'. And for Cate, the affective void is evident when she said, '*I was bottom of the list... he didn't fill me with much enthusiasm*'. In these instances, the need for 'wanting answers' (Adam's words) takes priority over finding solutions for themselves, and as a result, self-efficacy is reduced.

Control

The assumed locus of control in adult distance learning remains with the learner (Cascio, Botta & Anzaldi, 2013). The narrative descriptions confirmed learner control of the VLE takes time, practise and signposting, in the same way as gaining a sense of mastery in any new environment. Adam, for example, described how, '*once you got to grips with that, then it's quite plain sailing*', and Cate remarked how, '*everything was just so well organised, I could find what I was looking for*'. Unlike Knowles, Swanson and Holton's (2005) suggestion that adult learners are autonomous, meaning they are self-directed, the participants' collective narrative exposed autonomy as developmental and wrapped in connections with tutors. Autonomy and control either advanced through tutorial connection, or diminished with feelings of despondency, with little in between. Ambivalence toward tutorial support and intervention was not evident in the experiences recalled. When learner control was present, the narratives contain instances of self-reliance, critical thinking and practical management of priorities. From Ben's perspective, for example:

My tutor helped me... when you make a decision you have to... it has to be done in a logical sequence so at the end of the day the decision that you make is beneficial to everyone involved in that particular situation.

When learning control was lacking, the narrative tone moved from positive recognition of new understandings and future action, to negative reminiscence, with Cate feeling that, '*I was struggling, just like in the past*'. This interpretative insight points to the phenomenon of learner control as having polarised consequences, which stretch from positively motivated self-perceptions, emphasized in Dora's reflection, '*if they think I can do it then I must be able to*', to de-motivating, past referenced self-perceptions, as in Cate's remark that, '*I was back there again... I just didn't know what to do or how to do it*'. Tutor online presence, accessibility, and responsiveness provided a mirroring effect, reflecting back to the participants how they wanted to interact with their own learning. Tutors validated and challenged past and new ways of

thinking, acting as guides, sounding boards, and observers. When tutor connection was lost, learning was diverted and distanced as the learners searched for ways to regain control over their own learning.

Connecting to unknown people online requires what Dora calls '*a leap of faith*', necessitating testing the strength of the tutorial safety net. The less secure the tutorial connection, the tighter is the hold on the tutor as an information provider, and learning remains authored by others, more secure connections allow intellectual risk and development of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004). The process of rethinking contributed to greater levels of learner independence, built via the pedagogic links between distance learner and tutor. An empathetic ambience bridged the distance gap, encouraging change through self-belief and self-development when tutors are perceived to be knowledgeable and committed to distance learning. The tutors' ability to establish and maintain learning relationships emphasises the 'whole' person at the centre of their learning experience and is dominant in Rogers' humanistic understanding of the educational process, where,

individuals have within themselves vast resources for self-understanding and for altering their self-concepts, basic attitudes, and self-directed behaviour; these resources can be tapped if a definable climate of facilitative psychological attitudes can be provided. (1996, p.115)

Tenet 4: Adaptive learners review previous ways of feeling, thinking, and doing to achieve new understandings

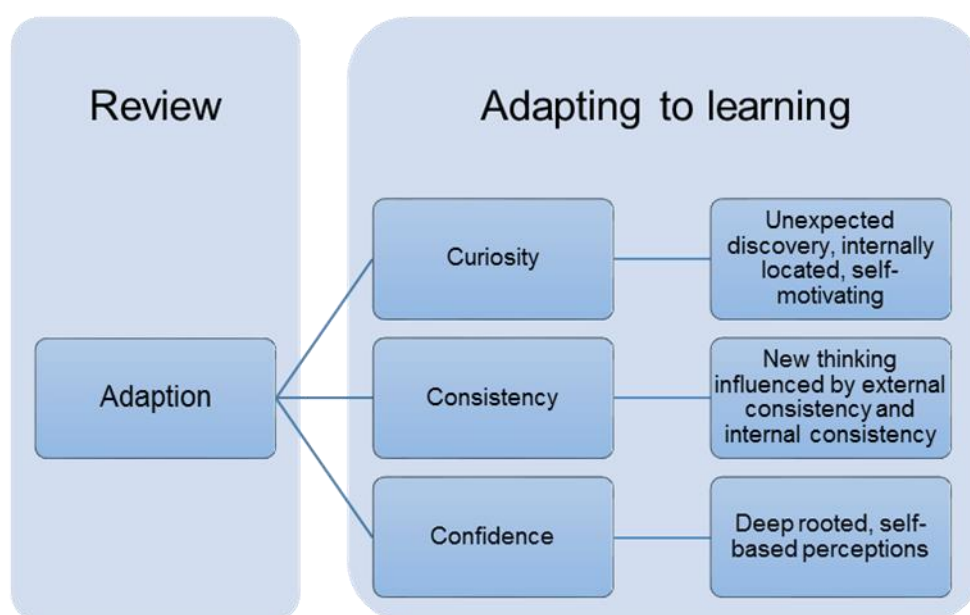


Diagram 11: Representation of key features of Theme 4 in Tenet 4

Adaptation is both a process and an outcome; an overarching concept encompassing the psychological, emotional, and behavioural ability to adjust. Learning is a process of adapting to our world in flux (Thomas & Seely- Brown, 2009). Change is ever-present, adaptation enables new ways of coping with, and managing change (Edwards, Hanson & Thorpe, 2013). The ability to adapt compels an awareness of who we are and the situations in which we find ourselves. Snowber suggests that, for embodied engagement of self, we need,

To become in touch with all of who we are: cognitive or intuitive, kinaesthetic or visual, intellectual or spiritual bears on how much we can access the integration of the totality of being human. (2012, p. 121)

Adaptation is a 'whole' person enabling experience which is a subtle, gradual process and seen in the light of external events. Therefore, the distance learning experience highlights awareness and testing of the participants' 'taken-for-granted' thinking (Heidegger, 2010). From an interpretative stance, embodied evaluation of 'taken-for-granted' thinking rouses adaptive understandings for new ways of being. For example,

Cognitive evaluation – *I had to think more about assessment* (Ben)

Affective evaluation – *I felt bad I didn't know that* (Cate)

Physical evaluation – *I had to do something different* (Dora)

Curiosity

Analysis of the learning experience reveals curiosity as a feature for developing adaptation. While curiosity may appear a predictable facet of learning, the nature and consequences of curiosity were unexpected discoveries. By enrolling on a higher education course, Dora presumed she was, '*going to learn something*' and initially she thought that '*something*' was information-based. Ben also, '*wanted to get more knowledge*'. However, as the analysis progressed, knowledge was evidenced as self-knowledge and not externally-located information. Developing curiosity in the context of adaptation, arose from what Pluck and Johnson (2011) described as an 'information gap'. The participants' narratives drew attention to the perceptual shift from viewing knowledge as a static, external commodity to something dynamic, self-determined and self-meaningful (Rogers, 1995). Adam's comment, '*you think you know about the side effects of medication*', exposed his tacit knowledge, but he later acknowledged that he, '*hadn't really thought about the side effects, you know, for the patient*'. Adam's thinking evolved as he became curious about what 'knowledge' meant for himself and

in relation to others. Once he had identified his own 'information gap', Adam showed surprise that he, *'hadn't thought more about it before'*.

Adam's curiosity links how and where knowledge is found, used and, applied as he emphasises the role of curiosity in self-motivation. His experience resonates with the differences in 'deep' and 'surface' learning (Marton & Säljö, 1976), whereby face-value acceptance is used to modify our acceptance of thinking and situations. Heidegger (2011) asserts that this type of embodied motion connects us with *dasein*. 'Being there' is a dynamic response and interaction between the self and our world because unquestioned familiarity removes us further from *dasein*. Indeed, to develop curiosity challenges ontological perceptions of knowledge and the epistemological examination of the production of knowledge. Rogers and Freiberg suggest that,

It becomes easier for me to accept myself as a decidedly imperfect person, who by no means functions at all times in the way in which I would like to function. This must seem to some like a very strange direction in which to move. It seems to me to have value because the curious paradox is that when I accept myself as I am, then I change. (1994, p. 17)

To add a practice context to the above point, Ben said, *'I used to think knowledge was information but now I think you have to check what you read'*. Checking involved comparing, contrasting and connecting pieces of evidence, but more importantly, identifying with experience, as Ben clarified:

we've learnt about mental health issues and now we have the general understanding of that, but for clinical purposes just to be successful you've got to have evidence. How do we get the evidence? We get the evidence through research, ok? We've learnt how to research and we're going to use that to research to gain or produce evidence so that when we do our clinical work we can say ok, I've made this decision because the evidence is 'A', 'B', 'C', 'D' because people come to you and say why are you doing this? You have to give a positive response (Ben).

Curiosity, as described in the narratives, is seen in Adam's and Ben's use of the term 'research', suggesting a desire to learn. Research in this context involves a systematic process of searching the external world to find ideas to understand more of their internal clinical world, as Ben pointed out:

I think, one thing that I've noticed is when people leave university as clinicians, of course we do our professional development from time to time, but I think at times, we tend to lose touch with our own research.

Ben's reference to *'our own research'*, situates discovery and learning in personal terms, just as Anderson and Braud (2011) propose the purpose of research is to discover more about the self by exploring the world. Adam too articulates the connection between the self and discovery saying, *'you start finding out what's interesting and what new evidence is out there, and then you want to carry on'*. Ben and Adam's appreciation of curiosity is a feature of intrinsic inspiration, enriching learning and taking self-development beyond course-based parameters (Pluck & Johnson, 2011).

Notably, curiosity is marked in the participant evidence as a disconcerting aspect of learning: irritation and frustration, on occasion, partnering the information gap. Answers took preference over discovery when under time pressure, especially in the early part of the course. Cate recalled how, *'everything took longer than I expected'*, and Dora observed that, *'there was never a single answer, so I eventually gave up looking for one'*. When the participants adapted to curiosity, they exposed themselves to new learning opportunities. Cate, for example, realised, *'that was just the way it was, and actually, that was good'*, revealing the unravelling of tightly-held, previous assumptions from affective ties. For Dora, curiosity guided new actions and she recognised, *'that was just the way I'd done it, but I let it go because it didn't fit'*. Collectively, the participants' narratives blended self-generated curiosity with the tutoring experience. As Diagram 12 reveals, the participants' secure connection with their tutors fuelled and, in turn, increased curiosity (Rogers, 1967). Referring to one of her tutors, Dora noted how, *'that person wanted me to succeed, no doubt about it'*. Without tutorial connection, curiosity was replaced by perceptions of tutor control, and subsequently Adam, *'just wanted [the tutor] to tell me what to do'*. Therefore, developing self-generated curiosity entails careful, nurturing tutors.

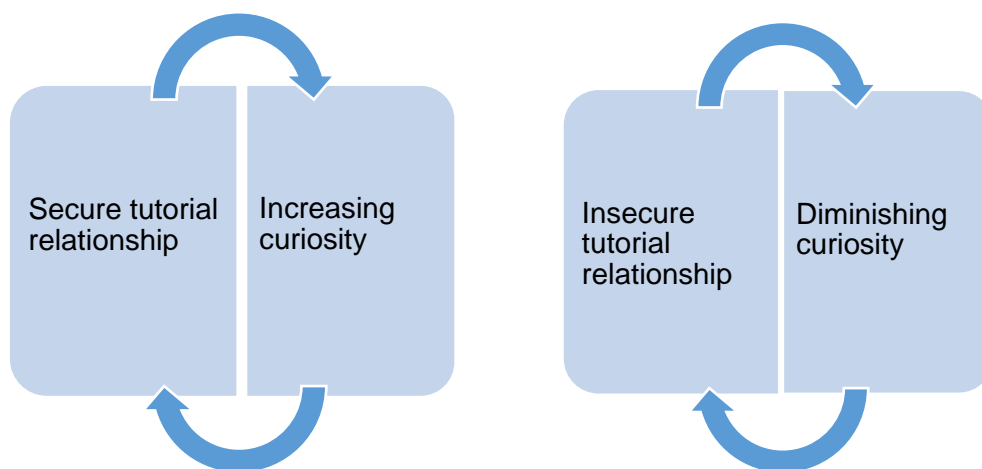


Diagram 12: The relationship between tutorial support and curiosity

From the participants' accounts, curiosity and adult learning are not axiomatic. In this sense, academic curiosity is not instinctive, but is found through 'help to learn', accessed via empathically driven tutorial support; with the ability to learn self-meaningfully, growing as confidence in tutorial connections improved. Supported by their tutors, the participants' exposure to increasing openness and flexibility in thinking, allowed curiosity to thrive. Heidegger (2010) believed that a person cannot be taught to think by another, because thinking is an experience of being-lost-in-thought. As soon as we attempt to instruct how thinking happens, we shift from in-thought toward an ontic method (i.e. describing the phenomena rather than the nature of the phenomena) which is not the same. For the most part, Heidegger's view suggests when most effective, the course provided pedagogic structures for growing self-induced thinking and curiosity. When least effective, the participants discerned the experience as a didactic means of receiving information.

Consistency

The feature of consistency in the participants' descriptions is not confined to a person or process and refers to an overall attitudinal expectancy, carrying two main facets: firstly, external consistency, in other words, given by others; and secondly, internal consistency generated by the self (Polkinghorne, 2015). The expectation of tutorial consistency and VLE content, is viewed as a quality measure and a sign of academic confidence as Adam identifies, *'they knew what they were doing and I found confidence in that'*. Tutorial consistency is not described as rigid uniformity, but located in an attitudinal stance to learning and support. Consistency, closely associated with clarity and confidence-building, mediates the embodied experience of change by accepting and respecting learning as exciting and unsettling. In the same way, stability is an asset for moving cognitively and affectively forward.

External Consistency

External consistency recognises how others, predominantly tutors, offer academic stability. Cate's comment that, *'just knowing someone was there'* illustrates how her sense of security as a learner at a time of intellectual instability was influenced by consistency from others. The tutor's role embodied a 'second pair of eyes', they *'checked out'* (Ben's words) ideas, observations and academic skills. Tutor steadiness prompted participants' to be confident to venture further into the unknown. By saying, *'in that module, my tutor was with me every step of the way'*, Adam confirmed that a positive tutor presence had given him the impetus to look

beyond his everyday thinking. External consistency manifests in Rogerian ideals, where respectful and positively-concerned tutors cultivate learning. Then external consistency establishes an environment for self-growth, by providing certainty under the conditions of genuineness, acceptance and empathy.

The realisation of someone feeling close, whilst geographically distant, is an example of sensing. The affective sense of 'someone being there' is different from someone being *physically* there but the implications are the same. Participants only questioned inconsistency in tutorial support when tutor support was not forthcoming, as exemplified when Adam, '*couldn't believe [the tutor] never called me back*'. He identified consistency in tutorial support as predictable and unquestioned, because of his experience on the course with other distance-learning tutors. Perceived consistency sets up expectations which are either met and unnoticed or conspicuous by their absence, Cate, for example, described how, '*the tutor was very different to how I used to be working beforehand... [It] didn't suit me so well, [the tutor] just didn't understand me*'. Apparently in this situation, tutorial consistency was not a blanket approach, but crafted to the needs of each learner, which Ben experienced when, '*I knew [the tutor] wanted to help me*'.

Internal Consistency

Experiences of positive external consistency are used to bolster internalised consistency with respect to the participants' motivation, self-progression and achievement of a degree award. In this interpretative light, internal consistency resonates with Rogers' (1959) views as learning along a continuum of meaning ranging from no personal meaning at one extreme to significant learning at the other. Rogers and Freiberg argue that significant learning,

has a quality of personal involvement – the whole person in both his feelings and cognitive aspects being in the learning event. *It is self-initiated*. Even when the impetus or stimulus comes from the outside, the sense of discovery, of reaching out, of grasping and comprehending, comes from within. *It is pervasive*. (1994, p. 5 [emphasis in original])

Adam's statement that, '*this course helped me rethink what I did and why I did it*' establishes learning relevance, constructed through personal meaning, self-ownership, and caring about the learning for the self and others. This perspective connects with Heideggerian ideas of authenticity. Heidegger views authenticity in an individual's decision about personal identity and the nature of existence, which includes comfort with 'not knowing' because;

Curiosity discloses each and everything, but in such a way that being-in is everywhere and nowhere. (2011, p. 170)

My interpretative perspective views internal consistency as a means for getting closer to the self because of a willingness to learn, adapt and change. A person moves toward understanding what it means to be a being-in-the world by understanding themselves as a being in that world. To fully experience a world, that is dynamic and evolving, awareness is needed of the self, as a dynamic and evolving being but it is stability in approach that brings about the confidence to cope positively with a self and world in flux.

Confidence

The elusive, self-based nature of confidence means that what is thought, and what is known about confidence are different, which makes interpretation problematic. Confidence is frequently referred to in the literature; discussions have only resulted in a weak definition. From a phenomenological standpoint, confidence is not an object, but for the participants, confidence is a 'something' and, in particular, a 'something' they wanted more of. Phenomenologically, the self is intrinsically located in the deliberations of consciousness and self-awareness. Experiences entailing issues of confidence relate to issues of the self, or as Heidegger claims, 'I am always somehow acquainted with myself' (2011, p. 251).

Each participant used the term 'confidence' in relation to a particular feature of the self (the 'I'), for example when Cate said, '*I wanted more confidence*'. Confidence is consistently regarded by the participants as beneficial, corresponding with Rogers' (1951) belief that positive self-regard promotes the potential for personal growth. The self-view of confidence signifies unique understandings and mercurial qualities of an internalised experience, and the precise meaning of confidence is difficult to articulate, as Adam said, '*I know what I mean, just can't find the word*'. In the narratives, confidence is a subjective, perceptual appraisal in the same way there can be no consensus about seeing colour (Merleau-Ponty, 2013), simply good attempts at describing what we mean, that may or may not be understood by others. Self-defined confidence is simultaneously intuitive, emotional, cognitive and physiological. When Cate undertook a self-appraisal of her confidence, she reflected how,

I definitely felt more sure of myself and I can feel because it was such a big thing for me to achieve it does make me feel a lot better inside that I've done it and I keep going on about being more confident, but that's where... that was about not feeling... probably feeling inadequate beforehand and feeling that now I'm ok.

Merleau-Ponty (2013) warns that feelings cannot be separated from the physical source because of the embodied nature of our experience; for example, Cate experienced a lack of confidence as an emotion, while for Dora this was a physical sensation, and she, '*just felt sick*'. In turn, the nature of confidence raises complex questions about the nature of self and self-knowledge (Zahavi, 2005) because the embodied experience of confidence connects the internal ('my world') to the external ('our world') (Merleau-Ponty, 2013). The participants gauge impact to the external world through the ability to take ownership of their process of adaptation.

Self-ownership of a developmental process in terms of thinking and action highlights Heideggerian ways of thinking about engaging with and testing our world, to establish our being-in-the-world. The four participants offered differing perspectives for gauging ownership of confidence. Cate shows how her successful translation of new ideas into practice enabled subjective appraisal, '*The course helped to improve my skills and confidence*'. On the other hand, Ben used signs and cues from the external world as a measure of confidence. He accepted making mistakes as part of the process of learning, whereas, Cate feared errors.

I actually failed the second assignment and I had to re-sit it, but the third and fourth assignments, the results were very, very pleasing because I'd gained the confidence (Ben).

Adam's confidence improved when he believed himself to be in a protected learning environment. As he said, '*When you feel assured... if I had a question and I'd feel safe and confident saying I don't really understand*'. Whereas, Dora took ownership of her embodied experience of confidence stating, '*it was about me. It wasn't about them. It was about me being confident*'. The differing perspectives offer an insight to how the location of confidence shifts depending on a person's unique experience of the world. Hence, adaptation requires recognition of the past, but exposure to new learning experiences challenges prior assumptions. The internal review process influences future action and adaptation progresses as self-based insights are gained into how confidence is felt, thought and acted upon.

Tenet 5: Active learners learning in multi-layered ways and respond with new learning strategies for themselves and others

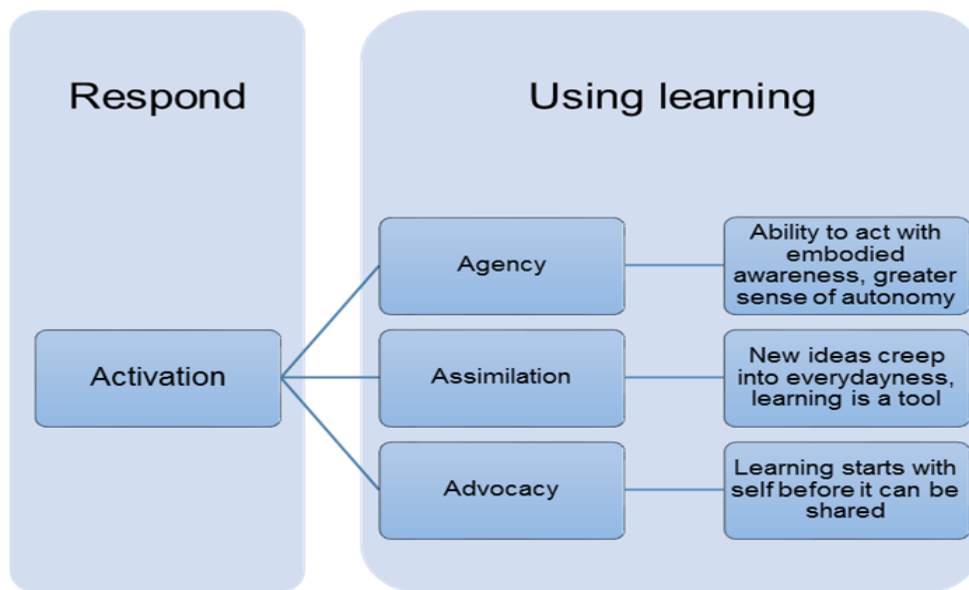


Diagram 13: Representation of key features of Theme 5 in Tenet 5

In terms of personalised impact, 'learning about' leads towards 'learning to', and the difference stemming from how knowledge is conceived. 'Learning about' remains authored by others (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012), 'learning to' indicates usefulness to the person (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). 'Learning to' activated learning for the lifeworld experience after the course ended, as Ben recalled that *'it wasn't 'til it was over I realised, hey, I'm doing something different here'*. Inherently, 'learning to' involved 'whole' person activation, including:

- Affective realisations – *I'm now comfortable with the grey areas* (Adam)
- Cognitive realisations – *I have learnt how to question* (Ben)
- Physical realisations – *I can't learn when I'm exhausted* (Dora)
- Behavioural realisations – *I now do things differently* (Cate).

These examples show embodied implications of 'learning to'. *Activation* progressed from identifying new ideas and concepts to testing new learning in the lifeworld. The shift from thinking to doing and back again, reflects Rogers and Freiberg's (1994) ideas of experiential learning. In my field notes, this theme reminded me of when I learnt to drive. I wrote:

When learning, the conventions of the road provided comforting boundaries. However, after passing my test, my self-based learning happened. My body began to work synchronously with the mind. Self-doubt balanced with concentration. Both were important in keeping safe. The unpredictable needed managing. Most of all I had freedom; the freedom to travel, the freedom to test and the freedom to take calculated risks. As the learning embedded into my 'everydayness', the radio went on and the act of driving was overlooked. The song now fills the moment my destination becomes my reason. (Extract from field notes).

Consciousness is undivided from the environment because the body's embedded interaction with the physical world creates our psychological states, innovating our activities. My analysis revealed the participants experiencing agency as an embodied phenomenon and not purely driven by thinking. Their narratives displayed perceptions of making a positive difference to themselves and others, in complex home and, more specifically, work environments. Furthermore, agents control and have a choice about their actions, agency is the aptitude to act in the environment through immediate embodied awareness (Campbell, Meynell & Sherwin, 2009). Meanwhile, phenomenologically speaking, agency is a complex concept. Although my interpretation of the distance learning experience sits in the frame of embodied agency, Merleau-Ponty's asserts the body to be a consciousness and a responsive entity, arguing that,

We experience our bodies not as objects in the world, but as the perspective from which we perceive the world and as our mode of engagement with it. (2013, p. 115, emphasis in the original)

Adam and Ben provided examples of how their learning directly translated into clinical agency in their interactions with others. Adam, for example, described how he made clinical changes saying, *'I think after doing the dissertation it was key because I introduced the new electronic system of doing care plans, I could happily have the arguments!'* Ben had a similar experience and noted how, *'things are different now because I am different; I am much more willing to speak out'*. For both Adam and Ben, agency is not constructed from a change in thinking, but in how changes to thinking provoke a change in action, and are examples of applied learning (Merriam & Leahy, 2005). Then again, Adam's and Ben's narratives are more than a simple transfer from knowing to doing, they embody the experience of autonomy. For Adam,

It's sort of a bit of a jump board on to what else I want to achieve. It's shown that I enjoyed it, I've taken knowledge away from it... I've put it into practice.

Agency

The participants' sense of agency is evident in the data through the dialogue about future aspirations. Therefore, whilst agency developed during the course, the practical application is noted after course completion. The ability to make employment choices is a shared outcome for all 4 participants. The qualification secured Adam and Dora's current clinical positions. Adam discussed how he would use his new learning to improve the service he was working in and consequently how his role will change. Ben had a specific career plan. However, neither Cate nor Dora had previously viewed themselves outside of their current work context or considered themselves viable candidates for other jobs. For Dora, the realisation of alternative employment opportunities made her reconceptualise her current role and what she wanted from being a nurse:

more importantly for me, if I ever want to leave this job to do something else, which I certainly think I need to start thinking about, after five-and-a-half years as a ward sister. I need to look for my future because I don't now want to fit into this post forever because I think it could become stale... so when I redo my CV... there's a hell of a lot of change on it.

Although Cate had no plans to change job, she recognised that she now had options, '*if I wanted to apply anywhere for a job, the fact that I've got that qualification is very helpful, the fact that I can use that for the interviews in forwarding my career if I wanted to*'.

Therefore, my interpretation reflects Rogers' (1959) stance that education differs from teaching about the world. Education creates an atmosphere where people learn how to interact harmoniously in, and with, the world. In doing so, they are able to problem-solve, consider alternatives and take ownership how they live their lives. Change in this humanistic context is not a singular event, but an ongoing, accepted way of being (Polkinghorne, 2015). Learning to accept and work with change has given the participants confidence to moving out of taken-for-granted thinking and toward new, more empowered ways of being. Thus the participants can no longer be described as receivers of information, now they are activators of their own knowledge.

Assimilation

Assimilation is identified in the data as an expression of embodiment influencing action, as embodiment is not the same as behaviour (Campbell, Meynell & Sherwin, 2009). Embodiment

refers to a realisation and acceptance of the wholeness of the person and how wholeness manages assimilation by instigating, managing, and celebrating change in the lived world experience (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). For example, in Cate's narrative, her statement, *'it all just merged'* expresses that assimilation is not a deliberate, particularly self-noticed or identified single act or event. Whereas, Adam's description is more indicative of assimilation as a sensory experience, *'I felt different, more confident to challenge what I saw'*.

Therefore, assimilation appeared as the participants used various phrasing to describe the uniting of inner world thinking with external world actions: Adam *'brought in'*; Ben *'applied my new ideas'*; Cate *'used what I had learnt'*; and Dora *'connected up'*. However, assimilation became clearer after the course had ended. Change and assimilation are influenced by time and closely related (Heidegger, 2010). Change is about something being different and assimilation is how the difference is integrated. Adam's use of questioning displays *'thinking out loud'* in terms of his new perspective:

from finishing the academic work you can justify the evidence base why you're doing certain interventions, especially for sort of the assessments, you know why are we doing these interventions? Are they NICE guidelines you know, what's the importance of them? Have we chosen it or has that person said it's special to them. Research methodology, you know what is research? Why do we do it? Why is it important and how can it improve our practice?

For the participants, embodied assimilation was a two-stage process. Firstly, internal concentration provides an environment where new thinking and ideas are grown; secondly, learning is expressed, and externally shared. Dora, for example, *'had to get it straight in my head first before I got in to it with my staff'*. Moving forward, assimilation gradually moves inner self-based thinking into outer shared actions. The development of an alternative self-narrative connects the two stages. As *'everydayness'* (Heidegger, 2011) had taken over after the course ended, identifying assimilation is challenging. On occasion, it is overt and known, at other times the impact of learning is hidden. Cate affirms this perspective, explaining:

I suppose it feels more like what I do now, but when I was doing those particular modules, and just after I was doing it, that seemed more obvious because it was just, oh, I've done this and it was because the modules were at the forefront of my mind, I'd be relating it directly to them more... now I might not be relating it... so directly to them but just thinking it as an ongoing thing and also the skills develop anyway don't they over time?

Heidegger (2011) regards routines as unnoticed until something happens to lift awareness. Although routines are part of life, they are adaptable as when Dora noticed how, *'my routine practice now is different from my routine practice before'*. Dora's understanding changed and

the outcome is that her routine also altered, as the seemingly disparate and often maligned gap between theory and practice diminished through newly assimilated associations. Theory informed practice and practice evolved. Ben, for instance noted how he was,

using some of those thoughts and whenever I've got some questions about something, I go back and research on it and I've come back with some better ideas.

Advocacy

Advocacy for the learning-self combined with self-belief, self-generated opportunities and self-determination. The participants' individual comfort with curiosity and validation of ability were reflected in new perspectives of learning. Cate talked about, *'what else I might like to do if I wanted to do any more training'*, while Dora, shocked at her progression to a Master's level module, observed how, *'I didn't expect to be doing that in a million years'*. The vocabulary in the data to describe self-based learning advocacy presented distinct strategies, including;

- Making (my) the learner voice heard
- Ask questions of the self and others
- Making transparent decisions
- Finding and access a range of information
- Reaching out and accepting support
- Taking self-responsibility
- Pragmatically solving problems
- Listening to the self.

As Diagram 14 shows, these strategies recognise space, time, and support as protective layers to building learning confidence. The precariousness of learning confidence evoked embodied consequences, recognised by Adam when he said, *'one tutor made me feel great and really motivated me, the other made me feel rubbish and I got fed up'*. Advocacy for one's own learning necessitates acceptance of the self as a legitimate learning being.

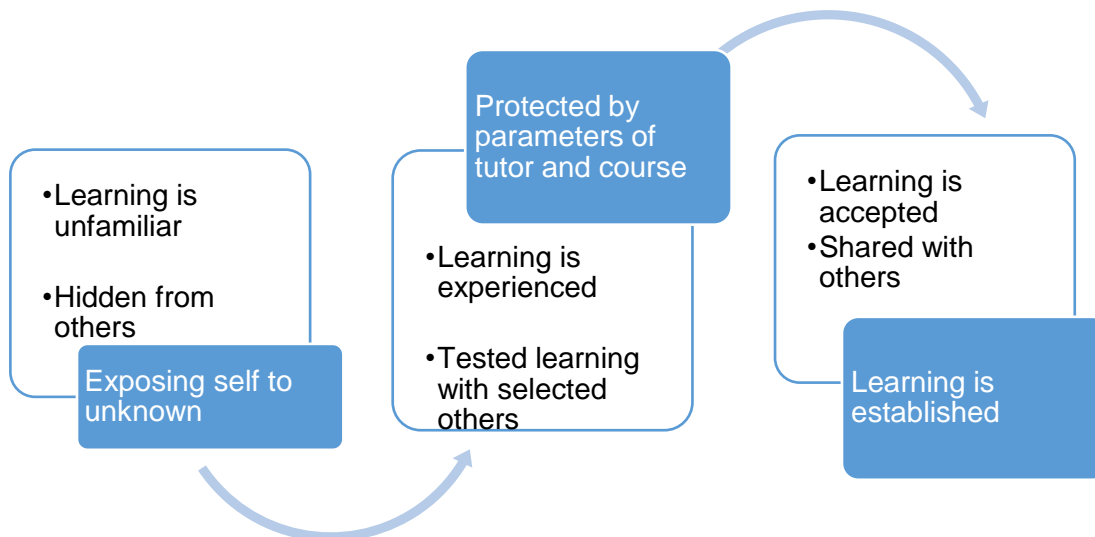


Diagram 14: Influencing features for learning advocacy

Advocacy for learning associates with advocacy for the self. Dora would *'tell anyone to go and do the course, but I would say work on yourself because that was the tough bit'*. When his colleagues inquired about the course, Ben advised them that, *'learning is not just reading, it's about what it means to you'*. Participants' insights recognise advocacy as supporting their own learning before becoming supporters of others' learning. Individual learning activated interest in others through overt demonstrations of the learning experience via dialogue and observable action. Participants did not identify sharing as being content-based, but rather more attuned to epistemological assumptions, which for Ben meant,

You just don't learn for the purpose of learning and saying I've got a BSc, you learn for the purpose of building yourself as an individual mentally and professionally.

Dora and Cate both identified how their work with pre-registration nursing students changed after completing the course. Dora recognised that she, *'now asked more questions rather than just telling'*, adding, *'if I can give them confidence to question now, I hope they will question in the future'*. Cate reported how her own confidence made her think differently about her *'supporting'* role with novice practitioners. She talked about, *'helping the students to feel what care is like, from a professional perspective'*. In a Rogerian sense, her comment shows an awareness that professionally governed experiences of unconditional care need to be understood and carefully managed because of the powerful consequences of caring for and feeling cared for. Dora's new questioning perspective and Cate's understanding of the professional context of care, advocated learning to influence hopefulness, in clinical knowledge, attitudes and skills.

Advocacy for learning permeated the participants' multiple roles. Outside the work context, Adam and Ben hoped their achievement would inspire their children, implanting the importance of learning in their homes. Indeed, as a tangible example, after graduating, Ben noticed his daughter's attitude changing to her school work and she continued to use the 'home work' space he had set up. Engendering hope is central to advocacy for learning, irrespective of the situation. Learning became more than the simple transfer of new information, and the participants shared a new way of being. Advocacy for learning changes the accepted world, into a world of potential (Heidegger, 2010).

Having crossed into the liminal space, participants could not return to previous ways of thinking and irreversibility is a facet of threshold concepts (Cousin, 2006b). The learning experience and graduate achievement gave the participants the opportunity to more actively and autonomously *respond* to their personal and practice worlds. Alternative responses replaced their 'taken-for-granted' thinking, and action as learning strategies developed during the course, which were subtly assimilated into the ordinary. Nevertheless, in order to share, adult learners must first attend to their own learning needs. For the participants, this self-focused attention and acceptance of academic support resulted in the confidence to find, test, and activate new ideas.

Summary of Thematic Discussion

Distance learning, in the context of this study, evoked change. The connection between learning and change is not new nor is the influence on 'subsequent direction or control' (Dewey, 2011, p. 45). As the technological aspects of distance learning disappeared within the humanity of adult learning, the technology served as a means to contact others and engage with 'the self'. The narrative presented portrays a composite picture of interaction within a defined learning context, resulting in sustained implications for longer term self-development. Five distinct, yet related, micro stages contributed to an embodied understanding, each describing important, personally-orientated aspects of a change process;

- Attention creates a readiness to learn
- Acceptance means viewing the self as a learner
- Accompaniment identified the importance of help to learn
- Adaptation happens because of learning
- Activation is a multi-layered way of using learning

Such observations are consistent with Halling's suggestion,

In everyday life, each one of us is something of a phenomenologist, in so far as we listen to stories that people tell us and in so far as we pay attention to, and reflect on our own perceptions. (2009, p. 145)

After the course ended and when learning had become embedded in 'everydayness', the participants reported greater confidence to question rather than maintain their previous reliance on answers.

Pictorial Representation of Insights

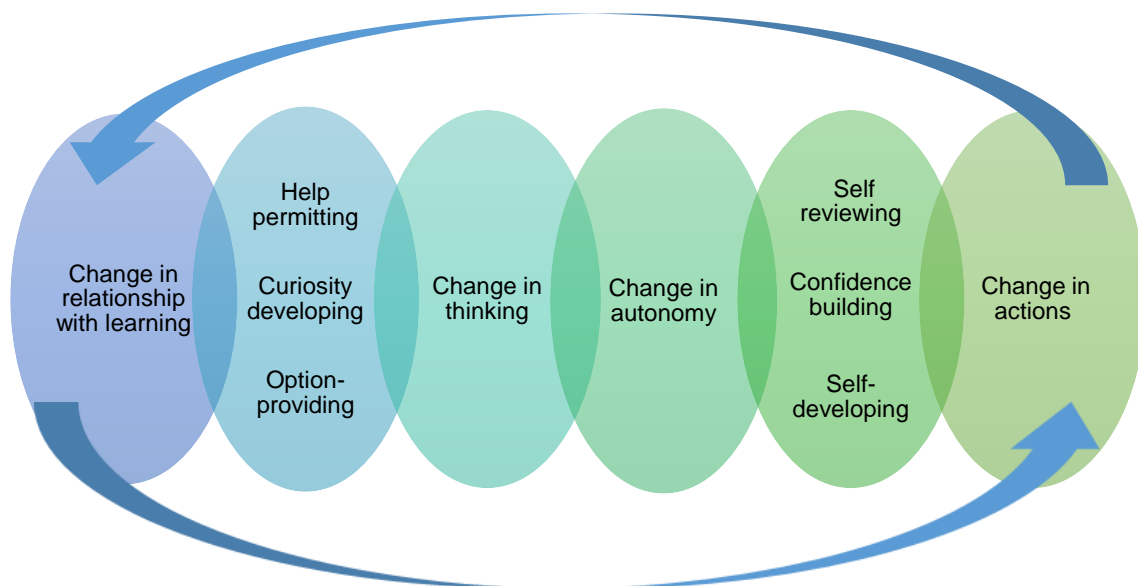


Diagram 15: Representation of a new outlook for how distance learners described their experience

This pictorial representation in Diagram 15 is multidirectional, with each component having an influence on the others as changes in the relationship with learning are related to changes in action and vice versa. The overlapping ellipses demonstrate the integrated nature of the learning process observed in the data.

Confirmation of Findings

Smith Flowers and Larkin (2009) stress that quality is important to IPA research. Nevertheless, disputes have arisen about the appropriateness of using criteria in qualitative research that emanated from the quantitative paradigm (Kvale, 1996; Yardley, 2015). Quality judgements in qualitative research replace quantitative measures of reliability, validity and generalisability with clarity, credibility, contribution, communication, resonance, and caring (Finlay, 2006). Generally, these benchmarks add up to a concern for trustworthiness, requiring explicit evidence of transparency via systematic processes built upon ethical integrity (Roberts, 2010; Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). Therefore, in qualitative research such as this thesis, rigour is not determined by set of criteria but is transmitted through my meticulous adherence to an explicit philosophical approach, my thoroughness in collecting data, and my openness to the data (Arthur, *et al.*, 2012; Silverman, 2013).

With regard to IPA, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) remind researchers and readers that any criteria used to assess quality needs flexibility because IPA is an inductive approach, which uses creative innovation to build hermeneutic perspectives on the lifeworld of others. As presented in Chapter 4, Yardley's (2008) quality principles of; sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, coherence and transparency and impact and importance, are suggested by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) as particularly helpful for IPA researchers and readers. Therefore, I have built Yardley's principles into the construction, content and outcome of this thesis, for example; in Chapter 4 (Research Design), I identify the principles in the context of this study, the principles are then used in Chapter 5 (Data Analysis), and in Chapter 8 (Discussion) the principles are employed in my own evaluation. In addition to the quality principles set out by Yardley (2008), Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) also note that specific to IPA, researchers and reviewers also need to be conscious of;

- i) Visibility of the idiographic approach
- ii) Attention to the experiential narratives for participants
- iii) Creative, grounded hermeneutic analysis
- iv) Contemplation of broader contextualisation of findings.

The Independent Audit

The independent audit in IPA research is a pliable method for presenting validity in the research process and findings, and consequently Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) view it being just as valid as Yardley's (2008) quality principles. My audit trail, recording my progress from proposal (Appendix B) to completed thesis, provides, in theory, an observable process which might be followed by other practitioners. In addition, I have systematically compiled a password secure, electronic file containing:

- Research proposal
- Ethical approval
- Correspondence with participants
- Audio recordings
- Annotated transcripts
- Field notes
- Supervision records
- Tables of themes / tenets
- Final report

Although the independent audit remains a hypothetical proposition, in this study it has value in reminding me to be rigorous in my interpretations to the end. The purpose of the auditable evidence is not to account for a single truth, but rather to safeguard transparency and the quality of the research process and interpretive insight. In addition, the independent audit is the ongoing maintenance of quality and validity, and not an isolated 'one off' activity. My discussions with peers and my supervisory team focused on ensuring that my defined themes and then pedagogical tenets remained grounded in the phenomenon. These dialogues aimed to prevent misunderstandings, and identify interpretations requiring more explanation from either the data or the literature. The use of direct participant quotes allows readers to judge my interpretive consistency.

Chapter Summary

Interpretations can only be developed through a sustained process of exploration. My interpretive exploration took me deeper into the participants' words as my phenomenological and my psychological understanding developed. These interpretative viewpoints led me to

experience distance learning with fresh eyes, seeing it as having the potential to bring about personal change. For the participants, distance learning was not limited by physical space as learning was not confined or defined by the four walls of a classroom. The virtual context enabled participants' learning to take place in, and for, themselves. My analysis and interpretation revealed the participants' experience of distance learning to be a complex blend of 'the self' and 'others'. The uniqueness of each participant's individual experience reflected a self-initiated and self-driven process, helped and hindered by people rather than technology. From a phenomenological perspective, the 'other' is always in relation to the self (Gadamer, 2013), so help to learn is an affective, cognitive, and practical phenomenon manifesting as responses to self-constructed appraisals. In accepting the whole person as a whole learning being, using every part of the self (emotionally, cognitively and physically), this research acknowledges the individual as an integrated thinking, feeling and doing being, made visible in the virtual world.

Chapter 8: Discussion – Situating my new view in the wider practice landscape

Introduction

As a new IPA researcher, I have taken forward Smith, Flowers and Larkin's (2009) suggestion to separate my discussion from my analysis and interpretations in order to promote transparency. In the context of IPA research, this discussion chapter marks out what Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p.112) cite as 'a change in register'. I am now positioning my interpretations in the broader literature by entering into dialogue between my phenomenological hermeneutic work, distance learning, and transformative learning theory. The literature I now include extends the theoretical background established in Chapter 2. My data collection (Chapter 4), analysis (Chapter 5), reflexive positioning (Chapter 6), and interpretations (Chapter 7) are combined to conceptualise a deeper, embodied experience of distance learning.

My research began with me wanting to know more about the learner experience of the distance-learning course I lead. Hence, the purpose of this study is to find out more about the learning experience and, importantly, the potential consequences. My research question is direct to the alumni, as I believe they can further my understanding of the apparent mismatch between theory and practice. I used the methodology of IPA to examine hermeneutically the transcripts of four distance learning graduates who completed a distance-learning course, one year or more prior to interview, a retrospective appraisal in contrast to the customary in-course evaluative data. Thus, with regard to the philosophical foundations of IPA, I have provisionally addressed my research question in the temporal frame, and can now offer in the following discussion, what Woolliams suggests is 'a modest contribution to knowledge, that is reasonable and can be defended' (2005, p.50, personal correspondence in Trafford & Lesham, 2008).

Contribution to Knowledge

In view of my research question, the interpretative work of this study reveals the experience of distance learning is close to the self. The participants offered data which exposed distance learning as a process of discovery, leading to sustained and useful post-course change. Importantly, learning to learn using the embodied self or alternatively, adopting the term I have formulated; 'self-connected learning', describes introspective development as more powerful than externally based content recall. As such, my insights are reclaiming the work of the pre-

digital educationalists John Dewey and Carl Rogers in an online setting by connecting the learner to their learning experience. The data indicated that the participants' refer to multiple meanings when describing connections, including;

- technological connections to access virtual learning
- connections in the pedagogic design between learning activity and assessment
- connections from content to external links
- professional connection to the content via previous and current experience
- connection with peers (in and outside of the course)
- connection with tutors.

However, these 'connections' necessitate action, whether switching on a computer, checking emails, constructing a discussion board message, or talking to colleagues in practice. Action involves decisions based on assumptions about the self in the context of the learning experience. Thus, connections between the learning and the self influence how other connections are interpreted and used. As a result, 'self-connected' learning becomes apparent when meaningful participation is based on the dynamic use of self, suggesting learning is part of the person (Dewey, 1938; Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). Without connecting primarily with the self, other connections (i.e. technological, tutorial and informational) are susceptible to being devoid of personal meaning. I therefore define self-connected learning as, 'the embodied experience of learning for the self, nurtured in a caring environment to empower ongoing self-efficacy, curiosity and choice'.

My definition is formed from my interpretative perception founded firstly in the themes identified in Chapter 5 and later developed into the pedagogical tenets presented in Chapter 7. As represented in the Diagram 16 below, the tenets input into the experience of self-connected learning. Each tenet demonstrates how the embodied self is involved in a layered process of change, nurtured by tutors in a technologically assisted environment.

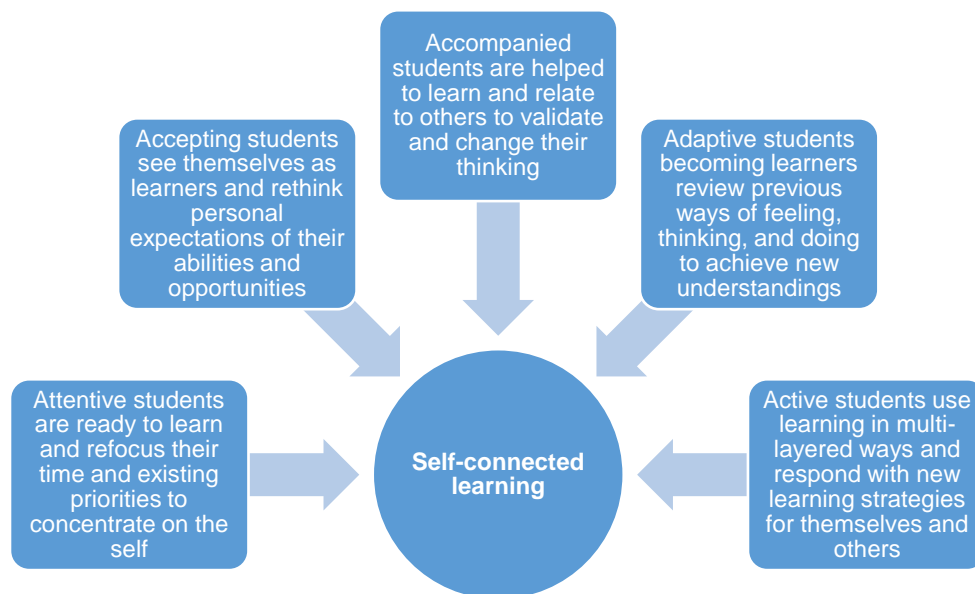


Diagram 16: Pedagogical tenets identified in Chapter 7 flowing into self-connected learning

The layering of an experience of change ties in with Heideggerian thoughts about the variety of ways phenomena are subjectively lived through, supplying purpose and meaning (Heidegger, 2010). The participants' learning experiences connect internalised appraisals of their past and present to future concerns and aspirations. In doing so, self-connected learning produces detectable and continuous cognitive, affective, and behavioural, inter- and intra-personal consequences. Corroborating the ability of distance learning to foster deep-level learning opportunities, my research counters perspectives in the literature presenting this mode of education as inauthentic, disadvantaged, and pedagogically muddled (Dreyfus, 2008; Huffman, 2010; Bollinger & Inan, 2012; Ossiannilsson & Landgren, 2012; Todhunter, 2013). Significantly, the 'human' quality of the learning environment created by tutors, including technological factors of ease of use and relevance, are important features in understanding why the participants connected with themselves, through their distance learning experience.

The conceptual context of self-connected learning fits in with Transformational Learning Theory (Mezirow, 2000; Mezirow & Taylor, 2011). Using the individual and combined descriptions, my analysis and interpretations observe the occurrence of transformational learning, defined by Mezirow as,

a structural change in the way we see ourselves and our relationships. (1978, p. 100)

I believe self-connected learning to be necessary for engagement with transformational processes in distance learning because connection enhances engagement and vice versa.

Student engagement refers to the level of attention, inquisitiveness, and optimism shown when learning, and encompasses the motivation to learn and personally grow. Authors such as Trowler and Trowler (2010) and Kahu *et al.*, (2015) indicate the importance of engagement in higher education in regard to positive student outcomes of, achievement, satisfaction and minimising attrition. That is to say, the data reveals transformative, self-connected learning is influenced by insight, willingness, and courage, to engage with learning for beneficial outcomes for the self. In taking a step back from the activity of learning, self-connection requires continual revision of the initial, internal reasons for enrolling on a distance-learning course. The participants' motivations change from immediate and external drivers to deeper, longer-term and personalised aspirations (Kegan 1994; Baxter Magolda, 2010; Fink, 2013) as the connection with the self emerges and strengthens. In a self-connected view, physical participation makes transformation possible (Snowber, 2012) because by turning attention to the self, alternatives to routine thinking and actions can be accepted (Dewey, 1938; Rogers & Freiberg, 1994; Mezirow & Taylor, 2011).

Ongoing scholarly debate surrounds Mezirow's theory of transformational learning (Newman, 2012, Mälkki & Green, 2014) and evidences the need to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions. Nestling in this complex approach to understanding education (Finlay, 2008), contemporary contributors (Taylor & Cranton, 2013; Merriam & Biereman, 2014; Mälkki, 2015) suggest extensive uncharted territory remains at the heart and edges of the theory. In particular, Snyder (2008) concluded more research is required to attend to the subjective subtleties in the transformative process, with greater recognition of the tumultuous psychic experiences associated with significant learning (Dewey, 1938; Rogers, 1959; Fink, 2013). Indeed, Berger (2004, p. 339) argues, 'if we were to call our program [of transformative education] initiatives of Catastrophic Disorganisation, we might have a hard time recruiting students'. Phenomenological work exploring Mezirow's (2000; 2003) theory from the lived experience attends to the nuanced processes determining subjective outcomes (Wringe, 2015; Maiese, 2017). Or, alternatively, the phenomenological process of transformational learning presents an existential challenge of *being* (Heidegger, 2010).

The narratives in my study are transformational because sustained changes to the participants' subjective frames of reference are detected, which correspond to changes in their underpinning assumptions (Mezirow, 2000; Cranton, 2006; Taylor & Cranton, 2013). Initially, the theory of transformation seems a well-intentioned destination for educational achievements, the voyage in a majority of research is mostly ignored (Land & Meyer, 2010; Mälkki & Green, 2014). My interpretive work addresses the void, giving insight to the subtle

layering of the journey, illustrating the phenomenon from first person perspectives. The route observed includes;

- i) Refocusing time and existing priorities to attend to the needs of the self
- ii) Rethinking expectations of self and ability to use opportunity to be freed from previously held perceptions of academic vulnerability
- iii) Relating to others and receiving empathetic responses to validate and challenge new thinking
- iv) Reviewing previous ways of feeling, thinking and doing because of a new relationship with learning and consistent curiosity
- v) Responding by using self-connected learning strategies based on autonomy and confidence in the inner voice.

The layered route of the learning journey identified in this study has relevance for understanding and working with Mezirow's (2000) frame of reference, consisting of habits of mind and points of view, both of which are moulded by the context of people's lives. In Heideggerian thinking, a person's life context is referred to as their historicity, and for Gadamer (2013), traditions are of central significance. These definitions by Mezirow, Heidegger and Gadamer show how a frame of reference is neither easily recognisable nor quickly altered as they contribute to who we are, and are so 'taken-for-granted' (Heidegger, 2010) that they are almost invisible to us (Mezirow, 2000). However, my interpretations identify with Mezirow's (2003) contention that alterations in frames of reference surface through the emotions. All four participants reacted affectively to realisations of discord between previously held points of view and new learning. Examples of substantial and sustained self-based change are apparent in Ben's observation that, '*we learn so we can change*', and Dora's assertion, '*I can't go back*', shows changes in her deeply held beliefs, developed over time. As the participants confidently and routinely question themselves and others (Paul & Elder, 2010; Baxter Magolda & King, 2012), their response to learning enhances their autonomy, which continues post-course. The nurturing learning environment fortifies individualised transformational processes, without the expectation of transformation to occur in a set time frame. The impact of the learning is most evident after the course, when the learning experience became embedded in routine life;

Adam: It was only afterwards I realised I was having different, more questioning conversations with my staff. I wasn't willing for things to stay the same

Ben: For certain, changes happened without me realising at the time, I can only really see that now, looking back

Cate: I wanted to feel confident. I didn't during the course, now I do

Dora: *I was too busy then to see anything, but I am different, I do things differently now because of the course*

The participants' transformational experience moved beyond informative learning because of their willingness to engage in, and expose themselves to, self-connected learning. Nevertheless, the learning process in the data leading to transformation, is neither linear nor apparent to the participants during the course period. Importantly, Mezirow indicated that time is needed for transformation to be realised, and,

learners need practice in recognizing frames of reference and using their imaginations to redefine problems from a different perspective. (1997, p. 10)

The difficulties experienced by the participants fit with Mezirow's (2000) contention that opportunities for change are uncovered when taken-for-granted assumptions are challenged via *distorting dilemmas*, or as noted by Cranton,

an activating event that typically exposes a discrepancy between what a person has always assumed to be true and what has just been experienced, heard or read. (2002, p. 66)

As indicated in the data, *distorting dilemmas* are not only found in single events (Mezirow, 2003; Cranton, 2006) but in a series of intertwined 'happenings' occurring over time, having more consistency with what Mezirow (1997) calls 'an accretion of transformation in points of view' (1997, p. 7). On the surface, Adam, Ben, Cate, and Dora participated in a single undergraduate course, with exposure to the same VLE, yet each formed discrete perspectives because of their unique challenges, triumphs, and longer-term outcomes.

For Mezirow (2000), mindful openness is the psychological discipline of not acting on immediate reactions and consciously withholding judgment. In turn, mindful openness gradually unfurled as the self-connected discourse progressed. Learning to self-manage instant responses is indicative of the second constituent of transformation; points of view, which are more pliable than frames of reference because they form and reform via reflection. Mezirow (2000) wrote that people more often question experience outcomes when they are not expected or wanted. Typically, points of view alter as a response to seeking psychological comfort. In other words, transformation is not a matter of receiving information or 'knowing more'; it is experienced in terms of how a person appraises new information and the impact of the information on themselves (Maiese, 2017). Mälkki and Green discern that knowing for 'the test' and learning for the self are contradictory because 'traditional education considers itself

to be an epistemological enterprise, whereas transformational learning is ontological in nature' (2014, p. 11).

The transformational layering process in my study observes a shift from *what* is known to *how* something is known (Kegan, 1994) through an increasing confidence to question. What is unknown proves a more powerful driver for sustained change, than previously assumed knowledge. Essentially for transformation, openness refers to curiosity progressing from known by others to questions of self, result in ontological modification. The process toward ontological modification noted in the data is not simply a linear sequence of expected events, influences outside of the self can have a destabilising consequence. For example, three distinct circumstances are identified when the desire for immediate, externally located solutions and answers overshadowed self-based curiosity;

- at the beginning of the course, when in unfamiliar learning territory
- when experiencing time pressures
- when feeling disconnected from tutors

In non-receptive learning situations, challenges to deeply held beliefs are alternatively translated or dismissed. Participants find themselves in circumstances that fuel their academic vulnerability, resulting in external barriers impeding the transformational process. Paradoxically, in my study, diminishing academic vulnerability and dependence on others are reconciled through the reliance on trusting, transparent and non-coercive tutorial relationships and modular structures. Although personal reflection completes the transformational process, habits of mind typically raise into consciousness through interactions and dialogue with others. The development of curiosity is a complex ebb and flow between understanding and not understanding combined with affective comfort and discomfort. Uncertainty is necessary. Mezirow (1997) opposes transformative change occurring from experiences that pair easily with existing frames of reference, in what Land and Meyer (2010) refer to as the power of the liminal space. Integrating new knowledge necessitates letting go of previously held ideas and, once done, the consequence is irreversible. For the participants, the tutor acted as an anchor point from which to explore safely beyond the comfort of the known. In the transformative learning experience observed, profound changes are apparent in the participants understanding of what learning means to them and what it means to be assisted (primarily by tutors) to learn. Thus, transformation is evidenced in the data to require support from others as opposed to a solitary exercise.

To extend my phenomenological conceptualisation of the transformational experiences and processes described by the participants, I will now explore more of the three key elements which encapsulate my definition of self-connected learning;

- Care and self-connected learning
- Embodiment and self-connected learning
- Empathy and self-connected learning

Care and Self-connected Learning

The accompaniment of others, especially tutors, empowers self-connected learning as personalised feedback awakens, guides and supports self-discovery. The participants recognised personally-orientated academic interaction as a form of caring. However, the notion of care is complex and Heidegger explains that our approach to care adjusts, depending on the situation we are in (Watts, 2014). For example, at a rudimentary level, caring is characterised by an attitude of angst about our own being. Alternatively, in the context of other people (being-with-one-another), Heidegger recognises care in the form of solicitude which Inwood (2000, p. 138) defines as 'our attitude to other human beings'. The three modes of solicitude proposed by Heidegger, include an implicit mode of indifference, where the being-there of others is unnoticed or neglected, and two further modes of 'inauthentic solicitude' and 'authentic solicitude. Inauthentic solicitude for Heidegger (2010, p. 119) is the type of concern that 'leaps in' for the other and is characterised as a form of control. This method of helping increases dependency because others are encouraged to relinquish their struggle and, although they appear to be receiving help, their autonomy is taken from them. Heidegger stresses that caring for others in this way fails to recognise the other person's existential project, with the effect of treating the other as a 'thing' or a 'what'.

In contrast, authentic solicitude is an approach which assists others to take care and responsibility for themselves. Heidegger (2010, p123) describes this as a 'leaping ahead' of the other in a way that releases them to face their own Being, thereby opening opportunities to assume and manage the burden of their own existence. Instead of taking over another's task, they are enabled to do it in their own way and deal with the outcome for themselves. In doing so, the unique existential project of the other is acknowledged and respected. Effective instances of academic care exposed in the data can therefore be explained in terms of the interactions which enabled the participants to connect to their own learning. The reassurances given by tutors to embrace curiosity produced beneficial, longer-term consequences as

opposed to when tutors 'leap in' with the short-term, externally generated solutions. Hence, in the Heideggerian tradition, the semantics of care deriving from the Latin *cura* emphasise the need to be aware of, and compassionately attentive to, the self, people and things (Escudero, 2013). In this sense, the participant narrative offers important insights about the multifaceted and often subtle nature of media-assisted, tutorial exchanges.

My observation of merging the notions of care (in terms of authentic solicitude) and curiosity is supported by Formenti, who explains; 'Learning does not come out of the blue, as the magic production of an isolated subject; it is an ongoing process, emerging out of a certain kind of interaction' (2009, p. 2). Thus, the importance of enabling autonomy-focussed tutorial relationships is highlighted and reinforced by Pluck and Johnson's comment that, 'Curiosity is an aspect of intrinsic motivation that has great potential to enhance student learning' (2011, p. 24). So authentic solicitude is seen in some of the tutors' actions when the participants are encouraged to take a new view of caring for themselves, by recognising and no longer accepting taken-for-granted thinking. Such transition from acceptance to curiosity is regarded by Heidegger (2010) as an ontological necessity for human beings (Inwood, 2000). Thus for Heidegger, curiosity responds to being-there by actively experiencing the world, in order to become oneself in the world. Conversely, living passively reduces the possibilities our useful world has to offer, limiting choice and personal potential. In this respect, the promotion and experience of care for the self, illuminates and integrates authenticity and consciousness in educational practice.

The initiation and maintenance of authentic solicitude is therefore recognised in the nurturing learning environment described, whereby intellectual risk-taking is encouraged at a time of academic vulnerability. Adaptation from knowledge authored by others, to knowledge authored by self (Baxter Magolda, 2010; Baxter Magolda & King, 2012) is guided by the tutor's skills in working with, rather than ignoring or removing the emotional consequences of learning. Tutors are seen in the data to employ overt and subtle strategies aligned to emotional containment to psychologically provide a sense of safety by recognising, then 'holding' the anguish so as to diminish emotional engulfment (Rogers, 1959) and encourage positive self-management to strengthen academic resilience. Evidence for emotional containment is apparent in Adam's progression from frustration with others to self-sufficiency and Dora's move from educational apathy to excitement in her learning. When support is accepted to self-manage emotions, courage is found to challenge previously held assumptions and attention can be placed in developing confident, self-based knowledge. As knowledge approaches the self, so self-connected learning unites the self with the world. Education in this sense allows a different take on Cate's statement; *'I know marks shouldn't matter, but they did. I felt like*

someone thought I was doing OK'. Cate shows her need for an external validation of her internal world, or coming from a Merleau-Pontian lived perspective, Muers comments,

To be educated does not refer to mental achievement or a specific highlight in our consciousness, but indicates an engaged mutuality with the world and being. (2013, p. 365)

Alternatively, learning is disconnected from the self when educational priority is placed on speedy knowledge attainment, marginal to the self. Yet, for a transformational process to begin, a desire is needed for something to be different (Mezirow, 2000). The problem is knowing what that change might be, because the self is taken-for-granted and unquestioned (Heidegger, 2010). Hence, continual endorsement to review the self feeds access to the personalised impact of the learning experience, rather than staying with purely informational acquisition.

In self-connected learning content knowledge is important, yet what knowledge means, compels review. The data indicates that transmitted content is viewed as knowledge belonging to others, neglecting the self as the major learning resource (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). The move to a position of transformation is recognisable in the participants' shift from wanting to find out about clinical practice, to learning more about themselves. In other words, seeing the self as inherent in the clinical world allows professional development to be a consequence of personal understanding. The participants' achievement of personalised outcomes stemmed from a nurturing, self-connected experience, encouraging and empowering the reconsideration of their relationship to learning through;

- Adapting to learning by the self, for the self
- Taking responsibility for their own learning and using new learning tools
- Rediscovering and remaining curious
- Acknowledging and responding to physical, affective and cognitive reactions
- Finding and trusting their inner voice
- Developing trusting learning relationships with tutors
- Viewing personal development as a continuing experience.

The unique insight from the data describes how a distance-learning course created a space to develop knowledge of, and for, the self. The example expands on the importance of looking beyond the accepted, to discover the complexities below the surface. The essential factor identified for self-connected learning is that the embodied self offers access to our inner and

outer worlds (Heidegger, 2010; Merleau-Ponty, 2013). The body, and not simply the technology, connects the participants to opportunities and experiences of learning. Without embodied participation, distance learning is not possible, nor transformative learning a consequence, because embodied learning powers self-connected learning. Merleau-Ponty (2013) reminds us that the interpretative and praxical (linking theory and practice) elements of education are located in the corporeal body and are neither abstract nor purely cognitive (Meurs, 2012). External knowledge is recognised in the present, however, longer-term understanding becomes more available as physical engagement, affective awareness, and cognitive curiosity combine in everyday existence. The closeness of the participants' distance learning experience to their sense of self and importantly, the consequences of learning for the self, soundly resonate with Mezirow's ideas for transformational learning. Embodied learning is inherently personalised as the learning belongs with and in the person. The following section expands on these ideas of self-connected learning and embodiment.

Embodiment and Self-connected Learning

The body holds memories (Merleau-Ponty, 2013) because we are the entirety of our experience. The past, present and future reverberate around the participants' making-sense and my own sense-making of the distance learning experience (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2008). For Heidegger (2010), temporality is non-linear: time does not exist as a removed object, we ourselves are time. Temporality fuses the dimensions of past, present and future, as expressed in Cate's comment, '*I didn't want the past to hold me back now*'. The present anticipates the future as our past 'having-been' transmits to the activity of the moment or as proposed by Heidegger in 'the moment of vision' *Augenblick* (2010, p. 313) meaning 'blink of an eye'. The temporal frame expands and narrows, just like the pupil of an eye, as attention focuses and then refocuses on subjective, defined experiences.

The participants' initial responses to distance learning reflected their past learning experiences, current work and professional aspirations. The novelty of distance learning triggered a tension in self-conceptions of 'capable practitioner' and 'novice distance learner', giving rise to academic vulnerability. With tutorial assistance, academic vulnerability became permissible as, '*it was OK not to know*' (Ben), liberating previously held assumptions about academic ability, and consequently, encouraging curiosity. A wide-angle temporal lens opens the panoramic landscape of the participants' lives, exposing clues as to the nature of academic vulnerability as an embodied experience. All four participants presented perceptual

recollections of their family circumstances, along with their work contexts. Work, home and study merged to form an integrated life and not a series of compartmentalised events.

Previous learning experiences permeate present and future learning opportunities and are seen in the affective shadows of Dora's impressions of school. For Adam and Ben, initial nursing training delivered skills but not learning confidence, and any academic association challenged Cate's self-concept. When the temporal lens narrowed, hidden but distinctive features of the distance learning experience appeared, bringing to mind the affective aftermath which resulted from one tutor call for Cate and the validation Ben identified from a conversation with a colleague. Wide angle and narrow focus descriptions combined to shed light on how physical, cognitive and affective awareness instigated and inhibited self-connected learning in the temporal frame of this study.

My interpretative understanding moves the analytic component of distance learning from thinking housed in a person's mind, to embodied engagement (Merriam & Biereman, 2014). Phenomenologically, the 'distance' element in distance learning no longer refers to geographical space but the space between the self and one's own learning, with the embodied self seemingly unnoticed (Sokol & Cranton, 1998; Heidegger, 2010; Merleau-Ponty, 2013). For example Dora recalls, *'I was so tired and my tutor helped me see that I needed to take time out to think about me'*. Dora's body informed her of her exhaustion, but she heard her tutor. Embodied engagement progresses the direction of distance learning toward a holistic, educational approach, enabling learners to become better aware of the learning that takes place inside the self (Maiese, 2017). Separating ourselves in terms of thinking, feeling and doing makes little sense (Snowber, 2012) confirming Freiler's perspective that,

Simply stated, embodied learning involves being attentive to the body and its experiences as a way of knowing. (2008, p. 40)

For Heidegger (2010) and Merleau-Ponty (2013), experience happens in a non-reflective state, our bodies manage the moment. It is only after the experience that our physical, affective and cognitive insights arise, held in what Gadamer (2013) describes as our traditions. Our bodies interpret experience, intrinsically shaped by our past, as illustrated in Cate's embodied impression of a previous assumption, *'My tutor helped me realise that I had now found a better place in my head'*. Without the willingness and opportunity to take a different perspective, we stay in our existing, embodied experiences. In this sense, embodied learning is a pedagogical issue and one which Dall'Alba and Barnacle (2005) assert as necessary for the involvement of learners in their worldly-rich situation. Indeed, the participants' descriptions articulate with

Sokol and Cranton's explanation of transformation, involving all-encompassing changes to thinking, feeling and acting;

As transformative learners, they question their perspectives, open up new ways of looking at their practice, revise their views, and act based on new perspectives. (1998, p. 14)

Acknowledgement of the self surfaces from physical, as well as emotional, cues detected through our bodies (Merleau-Ponty, 2013). Discussions of 'embodiment' derive from philosophical ideas, with debates surrounding embodiment widespread and dating back to Plato (Wheeler, 2015). Heidegger's work is considered ground-breaking in terms of early twentieth century thinking regarding mind, body, and knowledge connections (Thoibisana, 2008), as, for Heidegger (2010), it is the body which gives us access to our useful world and the usefulness of the learning experience is demonstrated in the intertwining of feelings, thoughts and actions in the distance learning narratives. The narratives are indicative of embodied learning whereby the body centres every interaction and reaction in the discovery of understanding and as Merleau-Ponty (2013) explains, deprived of the body, there is no state to perceive our world from, because as Meurs notes 'our body *embodies* the world' (2012, p. 367 [emphasis in original]).

The paucity of conceptual deliberation surrounding embodiment in distance learning is unfavourable to the sense-making of the transformational experience. This is because the self does not exist without a body but as Land (2004) suggests, distinguishing the concept of embodiment and the actual physicality of the body is messy and unresolved. A hidden function of a nurturing environment enables uncertainty to belong to the individual and takes advantage of using the body to unite past, present and future experiences. Dora's experience reflects how the components of change were set in the moment of learning, with embodied self-based review seemingly unnoticed at the time (Sokol & Cranton, 1998; Cranton 2006), whereas, Adam's recollection that, '*my tutor kept asking, so what does this mean for you? I now regularly ask myself the same question*', reveals tutorial interaction can raise awareness of the embodied self as an ongoing, transformative learning resource. Often in distance learning research, embodiment is connected to the physical body via visibility in terms of participation and engagement (Trowler & Trowler, 2010; Cleveland-Inness, 2014; Kahu *et al.*, 2015). Embodiment from a phenomenological stance, refers to engagement with the phenomenal body and is thought of as our embodied presence (not physical presence) in the world. Feenberg contends that the phenomenal body 'has amazing plasticity' (2003, p. 107) to adapt and transform in a virtual, as well as in conventionally assumed (physical) learning environments.

However, Dreyfus (2008) remains unconvinced of the efficacy of distance learning, as the body is removed from the physical experience of education. He contends that distance learning is more focused on the organisation and communication of discrete pieces of externally-oriented information. Meanwhile, the majority of what is known to us cannot be expressed or shared readily with others because pre-reflective knowledge is convened in the body, providing an intuitive handle on situations, leading to action. To take an alternative stance, the body and not the technology facilitates learning and concerns over the efficacy of technologically mediated learning, neglect the power of the embodied self (Ross *et al.*, 2013). My interpretive stance leans more toward the work of Snowber (2012), contesting Dreyfus' (2008) assumption. Snowber maintains that we have become distant from using our body as instruments for learning. In her view, we have become less observant to what our bodies tell us about ourselves, our experiences, and our world. As she states,

The lived body is the felt body where we make connections to the multiple sensations around and within us. The feel of the wind on the skin, fingers typing at the computer, the pain in the lower back, the joy of one's torso swimming, and the tears in the belly all connect us to the lived body. (Snowber, 2012, p. 55)

Insights from my work show the impact of reconnecting with the embodied self, coming full circle to view distance learning as a close and personal phenomenon. Technology-mediated learning is one way to fulfil Dewey's (1938) recommendation for learning; that its purpose is to find new ways to know more about ourselves and the world we live in. The role of self-connected understanding is easily overlooked because 'the self' is 'taken-for-granted' (Heidegger, 2010) and less tangible than the technological or structural aspects of distance learning (Salmon, 2004; Laurillard, 2012). Furthermore, self-connected learning does not lend itself to the types of quantifiable, time-limited outcomes which Palmer and Zajonc (2010) and Saunders, Bamber and Trowler (2011) suggest higher education is more inclined towards.

The acquisition of self-connected learning encompasses the senses, using the 'whole' of us to interact with our world. The participants felt, thought and acted as a perceptual response to the distance learning environment and the tutors they encountered. Consequently, embodiment has implications for deepening understanding, transferring learning to meaningful, self-connected learning. And, perceptions can be seen as potent drivers in the educational experience for both learners and tutors. As Lave and Wenger argue,

Participation is always based on situated negotiation and renegotiation of meaning in the world. This implies that understanding and experience are in constant interaction – indeed are mutually constitutive. The notion of participation thus dissolves dichotomies between cerebral and embodied activity, between contemplation and

involvement, between abstraction and experience: persons, actions, and the world are implicated in all thought, speech, knowing, and learning. (1991, pp. 51-52)

Perceptions are deeply personal, bound in the past and triggered by the moment and possibly experienced as anomalous feelings, void of linguistic interpretation until the words are coaxed from the depths of consciousness. Consciousness encompasses the perceived lived experience (Dreyfus, 2008). Lawrence suggests, 'Knowledge is present in the body before it reaches our conscious awareness' (2012, p. 7). In terms of distance learning, a re-negotiation of the mind/body divide is required to raise empathic awareness of what the body is telling us about the experience. For self-connected distance learning to occur, Diagram 17 shows how a space is needed for interaction between the embodied-self and self, embodied-self and technology, embodied-self and others (the world).

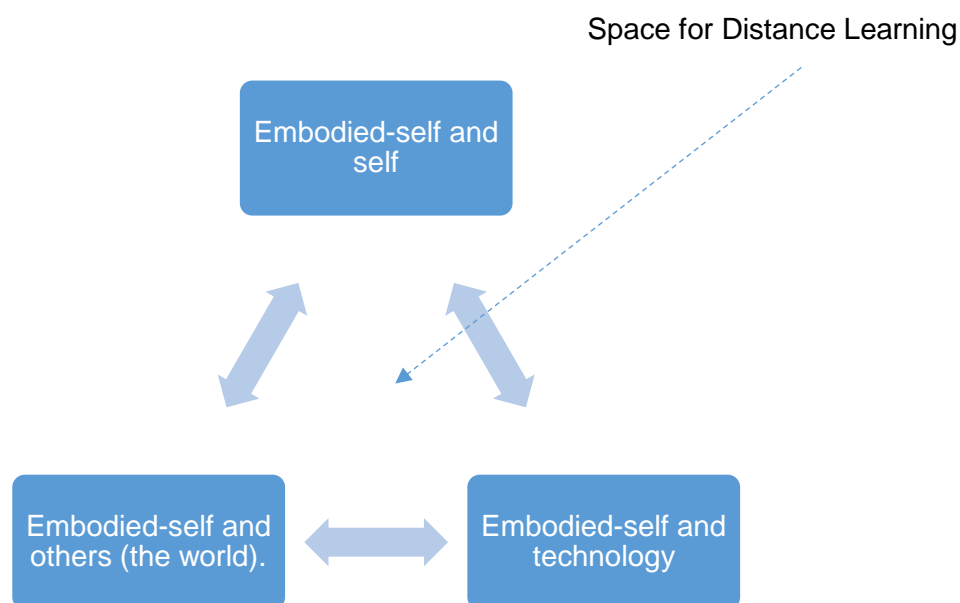


Diagram 17: The embodied self and space for distance learning

My interpretations of self-connected learning are in line with contemporary work in the distance learning arena, where the significance of embodiment is slowly emerging (Bayne, 2004; Sidhu & Dall'Alba, 2012; Sheail & Ross, 2014). Although, a discrete body of work at present, my insights are surrounded by a much wider technically-orientated, content-focused and attrition-minimising milieu. Embodiment in distance learning is an apparent contradiction because, as Dreyfus maintains, 'we perform as disembodied, concealed beings in cyberspace' (2008, p. 31) and a major contention as to why distance learning struggles to replace the presence of the human contact in face-to-face interactions.

My research gives an alternate perspective of the human element in distance learning, found in the phenomenal (Feenberg, 2003) as well as the physical body. Merleau-Ponty (2013), portrays the phenomenal body as our embodied presence in the world. In this respect, the presence of a person online is more than visible participation (Ross *et al.*, 2013; Sheail, & Ross, 2014), it is an empathic recognition of the whole person involved in their own self-connecting learning. In this view, human-to-human connection is possible because from a Heideggerian standpoint, tutor and learner are united because of their being-ness (Heidegger, 2010). Therefore, whilst the issue of geographical distance continues to feature heavily in the online learning literature (Zawacki-Richter & Anderson, 2014; Ubnell, 2017), my work suggest that educationalists may be missing the obvious. The issue found in the data of this study refers less to the distance from the university, and more to the distance between the self and the learning experience. Geographical and technological distance melts into togetherness through a shared experience of wanting to know more about ourselves and our world. Halling suggests interpersonal understanding of another is not a matter of 'getting inside someone's head' or 'achieving a communion of souls' but looking at what the other looks at and arriving at a common meaning (2009, p. 21). Hence, the final part of this discussion chapter presents ideas relating to empathy and self-connected learning.

Empathy and Self-connected Learning

In distance learning, the self cannot be avoided as all learning actions are self-initiated. To progress self-connected, transformational learning a step further, awareness and understanding of embodiment is necessary; first, to identify and contextualise self-based learning needs and, second, to integrate physical, cognitive and affective strategies to meet these needs. For the participants, meeting their own learning needs (Knowles *et al.*, 2005), in a holistic sense, positive changes happened, developed and continued. Through empathic tutorial support, the participants in this study came to recognise themselves as their most instrumental learning resource.

Therefore, the participants lived their learning, habitually strengthening self-connection or in Ben's words, '*from knowing, to recognising the ability to question*'. Attaining academic confidence, personally-orientated tutorial support gives the security to look for alternative perspectives. However, commenting on Heidegger's ideas of the student/teacher interaction, Riley notes, 'it would be a mistake to think the teacher ever *makes* the student comprehend, for the teacher has this neither within her grasp nor under her control' (2013, p. 804, emphasis in the original). The empathic characteristics of tutoring described, enabling self-empathy,

subtly differs from conventional directions of tutor activity (Haythornthwaite & Andrews, 2011; Garrison, 2011; Gooley & Lockwood, 2012; Beetham & Sharpe, 2013). Heidegger's (1998) concept of *letting learn* identifies a situation in which knowledge is authentically co-constructed, constructing gateways for being-in-the-world (Riley, 2013).

The sense of authenticity is notable as the participants tapped in to the affective consequences of tutoring interactions as facilitating (or debilitating) their self-connection. Reports of a positive tutorial presence triggers closeness and openness to the learning experience, as opposed to a vehicle for transmitting externally-located, subject content. My intention, in line with Wringe (2015), is not to devalue useful knowledge in terms of content, rather my work demonstrates empathic tutorial approaches as focusing on *how* learners move beyond content. The interpretive focus of my analysis differentiates between education as adding knowledge and a vision of transformation, concerned with changes embedded in the self.

A strong component of the transformative process in the data is empathy. Empathy represents a keystone in shaping learning through the management of affective reactions when developing the confidence to be curious. My proposition for an empathetic understanding of self-connected learning temporally aligns with the principles of adult learning theory (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2012) along with Level 6 descriptors of graduate-ness (QAA, 2014). The participants' previous learning experiences are valued and embodied learning in the present is extended to the experiences of the future. Recognising empathy as central to the participants' experiences of feeling academically cared for, indicates that distance learning permits close humanistic ties. Indeed, Cleveland-Innes argues,

online learning offers the opportunity to examine and rethink the teaching and learning enterprise in education broadly. Online learning can be conceived of as a new pedagogy, where strategies such as interaction and dialogue are introduced back into the higher education model. (2014, p. 1)

Tutor presence in the distance learning context is viewed as important (Veletsianos, 2010; Haythornthwaite & Andrews, 2011), but significantly my research indicates that their caring approach must be constructively felt. The data reveals Rogerian perspectives and the augmentation of pedagogic design with supportive, knowledgeable and consistent tutors, to be key assets when observing a learning space sensitive to transformational outcomes. It is debatable whether transformational learning is an individual process, as my research shows that the use of the self as learning resource is nurtured in an environment, where the process is influenced by others. Connecting with others entails sustained embodied effort for learning

to be sought, translated and actioned. In Heidegger's later writings he presents the nature of empathic educational relationships as;

The true teacher is ahead of the students only in that he has more to learn than they; namely, the letting learn. (To learn [means]: to bring what we do and allow into a co-responsibility with that which in each case grants itself to us as the essential). (1998, p. 261)

For Heidegger, empathy does not bond people together, but *being-with* makes empathy possible. It is the nature of dialogue and not the content that is important and is observed through the participants' embodied sensing of tutorial interactions that comforted, confirmed, and challenged pre-conceived self-concepts of learning efficacy. Thus the senses enabled the learning to happen in the present. Sensing allowed previously held beliefs to be exposed, resulting in a range of emotions including frustration (Adam), embarrassment (Ben), confusion (Cate), and loneliness (Dora). Cognitive and affective awareness illuminated subtle, technologically-mediated signs of tutor care and these included the speed and tone of email responses, as well as perceived organisational aspects of the course (e.g. clear instructions). Empathic tutors acted as safety filters for emotional reactions, so the participants could realise, accept and learn how to manage themselves during their transformative processes. A nurturing environment uses the temporal frame to acknowledge respectfully and link a person's past, to their present and future. Affective concern, raised when questioning the self, summons up Mezirow's (1997) argument for transformational learning to be supported in a trusting environment, further emphasising Rogerian ideals for the learner/tutor connection because,

the facilitation of significant learning rests upon certain attitudinal qualities that exist in the personal *relationship* between the facilitator and the learner. (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994, p. 305 [emphasis in original])

In addition, my study emphasises how tutorial relationships are also influenced by the tutor's own connection to the learning process. Using their subjective observations, the participants determined the tutor's empathic reactions through their expressions of; knowledge, academic confidence and commitment. Such facets of the tutor's communications influenced the learners' own experiences of academic vulnerability, either by instilling security, or fuelling despondency. Pedagogically, Dewey (1938) considers empathy as essential for significant learning, leading to transformation as sensitive discourse for the reappraisal of beliefs, feelings, and values (Cranton, 2006; Fink, 2013). Blackie, Case and Jawitz (2010) also propose that the components of interest and empathy (Ramsden, 1991) characterise a student-centred approach (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994), yet empathy is often overlooked.

One reason for the empathy oversight may be that human-to-human empathy is apparently straightforward, while simultaneously complex. Phenomenologically, empathy denotes experiencing one's bodily experience as another. So, a philosophical quandary arises because as Zahavi notes, 'The only mind I have direct access to, is my own' (2001, p. 151), whereas, Hooker (2015) presents the self, others, and the world to be inherently connected, mutually informing each other, each being understood through their interconnection. It is not possible to understand a part of a person's experience without understanding the whole, which is impossible because *I* am not *them*. The phenomenal body (Feenberg, 2003) allows differentiation, with the experience of physical and cognitive movement, permitting alternative, interpretative viewpoints. When something or someone is observed, separateness is retained because of the body. Halling explains, empathy necessitates separateness to allow one person to pay attention to another, rather than claiming the experience for the self,

We live in a world where it seems that everyone is rushing from one appointment to another and where we rarely give full attention to a fellow human being. (2009, p. 21)

Halling's (2009) phenomenological perspective is in keeping with Rogerian educational ideals, where the tutor's empathic understanding is combined with authenticity and an attitude of trust in learner-centred environments. In the data, tutor accessibility, content and tone of text-based responses, the focus and timing of verbal conversations, together constitute benchmarks for the participants' subjective appraisals of tutor connectedness and consequently their empathic understanding of distance learning. Perceptions of secure tutor connectedness interlink with positive descriptions of self-connected learning through personalisation, which is absent in descriptions of more content-laden interactions, indicated by Cate, '*he just kept repeating the learning outcomes, I thought – yeah, but what does this actually mean for me?*' When Adam and Cate reported a lack of connection, the tutor and module appeared unreachable as they became physically and affectively disconnected from their own learning. In these instances, the tutor, and not the technology, became a barrier and a source of frustration. The technological learning tools became redundant when not in use by tutors or learners. Conversely, when empathic understanding is detected, technology is a positive conduit for communication, interpersonal connection, finding resources, gathering ideas, validation, and positive challenge.

Chapter Summary

The participants chose to participate actively in their own learning and 'made time' for themselves by carefully managing existing priorities. Time played a major role in gaining an

authentic connection between the self, the content, and the learning. Consequently, my interpretative understanding is not in line with bodies of evidence pertaining to the expediency or efficiency of distance learning, as self-connected learning takes commitment, time, and tutorial support. Hence, the real story behind pedagogical structures and quality content can be seen in the participants' self-connection, affective appraisals and nurturing learning environment. The phenomenological hermeneutic paradigm opens a new way to understand my practice and the learners I work alongside. I now consider the self in terms of learning about the very nature of what it means to exist. Thus, my enquiry is deeply rooted in the subjective meaning (Wringe, 2015) of the distance learning experience, rather than being indicative of the tangible aspects of participating in distance learning.

Learner-centred interpretations support further consideration of an embodied pedagogy for distance learning, and this is discussed in Chapter 9. The experiences of distance learning accumulated in the participants' descriptions of change, and was linked to affective reasoning (perceptions), thinking habits, and actions; outlining how embodied learning integrates feelings and thoughts with physical activity. As a consequence, the narratives offered by the participants can be labelled as self-connected because the physical application of thought contributed to the affective processes required for transformative learning. I would argue then, that self-connected learning unites transformational and phenomenological hermeneutic traditions by foregrounding the lived experience of distance learning via the 'lifeworld existentials' identified by Merleau-Ponty (2013) in terms of body, time, space, and relations with others.

The outcome of my research is challenging for learners and tutors in the way in which distance learning is understood, managed and delivered. As part-time, distance learning students, the participants found themselves in a complex relationship with their own learning, while the nature of distance learning potentially makes learners invisible to learning organisations (Bayne, Gallagher & Lamb, 2012) and to others (Sheail & Ross, 2014). From my analysis, I conclude that the participants did not learn 'virtually', in their VLE: they learned within the reality of themselves, via their life context – a life continuing behind the technological screen (Adams, 2014). This study provides evidence of the distance learning experience in terms of embodied, self-connected engagement, with transformational processes prompted by caring tutors, in nurturing learning environments. The participants moved through self-connected phases of learning, juggling outside commitments with their study time, experiencing affective upheaval, whilst finding alignments between their academic and professional lives.

Chapter 9: Conclusion - Applying new outlook

Introduction

The chapters in this thesis represent the cumulative stages of a research journey, revealing how my interpretative discoveries matured from my initial practice observations through new understandings generated from the participants' experiences gifted to me. Therefore, this final chapter acts as a coda to review the decisions and insights made during this study clearly and concisely. My original contribution is stated, recommendations are offered, and consideration is given to transferability and dissemination. To avoid any over claim, I also examine the limitations of my study. Before concluding this chapter and thesis, I will work reflexively, discussing the impact of interpretative phenomenological research for me as a person and for my professional practice.

Rationale

My research journey began in the context of my own educational practice. Questions of how best to promote adult intellectual development have punctuated philosophical and pedagogic deliberation and, contemporary empirical enquiry (Pring, 2015). Zawacki-Richter and Anderson (2014) note that whilst conventional face-to-face teaching remains prevalent in higher education, a distinct shift continues toward incorporating technologically-assisted teaching and learning methods for campus-based students as well as wholly remote, off-campus (distance learning) students. Therefore, educational research such as mine is important because the repositioning of course delivery, combined with evolving practices, necessitates adjustments to the way higher education uses and understands technology for teaching and learning (Major, 2015). A critical stumbling block for distance learning indicated in my literature review (Chapter 2) is how educators can best offer relevant and meaningful educational experiences to adult learners (Ossiannilsson & Landgren, 2012).

Research question

The phenomenological orientation of my research question arose from my routine practice, investigations of the available literature, and my aspiration to achieve a purposeful understanding of the distance learning experience. I asked, how do distance learning graduates describe their learning experience? My question is deliberately constructed in an

open frame to encourage participants to tell me their distance learning stories, so that I might achieve new insights through my interpretative analysis of the data. The question proved useful in maintaining methodological coherence and ensured the focus remained on participants learning experience.

Methodology

I used IPA as a theoretical lens to survey reflexively the unseen *lifeworld* of the distance learner, but I heed Finlay's assertion in my study that,

There are important differences, however, between a philosopher's reflections and the phenomenological researcher's reflective analysis of descriptions of lived experience. As researchers, we are not engaged in pure reflection, and often we deal with other people's accounts. Pragmatic, instrumental compromise is needed to apply philosophical theories to empirical psychological research. (2008, p. 1)

Therefore, the overarching label of phenomenology covers a philosophical movement along with a collection of research approaches (Smith, 2016). Husserl (1936/1970) started the phenomenological movement as a drastically different way of investigating philosophy. Subsequent theorists, including Heidegger (1927/1962), Gadamer (1900/2002), and Merleau-Ponty (1908/1961) turned from the Husserlian project, concerned with the essences of phenomena and the nature of consciousness, to wanting to find out more of the existential and hermeneutic (interpretive) features of *being*. When considered in the context of research, phenomenology studies things in respect of their nature and significance by attending to the way things appear via our experiences.

Sample Inclusion

Focusing on the alumni from a specific course, the participant group comprises of one person from each degree classification (QAA, 2014). The small-scale, idiographic nature of my work may be considered to be a limitation when reviewed through the lens of a different paradigm. In the sample selected, a balance is struck between the limited number of alumni at the time of the study, the availability for participation and the richness of account possible given the parameters of the sample. My sample selection responds to Brocki and Wearden's (2006) concerns for the potential loss of subtle analysis when sample sizes are too big. The sample selected enabled me to use the gift of data to the best of my ability. I deliberately took the time

to extract every ounce of insight by looking further and further into the participants' experience. From my detailed work, I am now in a new position of understanding and as such, ideas for practice have emerged. Yet, my interpretations, deliberated in terms of the phenomenological literature and other research, intentionally avoid generalisations or determined actions; rather I can now share different ways of thinking about accepted educational practices. IPA is not a methodology claiming generality: instead, I offer a temporal insight from a single case which has cast an alternative light on previous assumptions.

Data Collection

I collected rich data from the participants via semi-structured telephone interviews (Irvine, 2011) and this was confirmed by the participants themselves at verification meetings. The experience of interviewing opened my thinking to van Manen's (1990) unease with the word 'data', suggesting associated quantitative overtones. To draw on previous understandings, the word 'datum' is recognised as being 'given' or 'granted', confirming my agreement with Holloway's (2005) belief that qualitative data is a gift. I acknowledge the unique involvement of each participant, as they gave so much of themselves when telling their distance learning stories. Their words felt like gifts, because they gave me insights which I did not have. The quality of data gifted is an asset to my study because, as Ellis-Hill, Payne and Ward (2000) state, participants can, on occasion, struggle to fully comprehend their own experiences, let alone give descriptions to others. In presenting the participants with an opportunity to be heard through recording their words to create shared transcripts, I facilitated reflective evaluation of their distance learning experience. In this sense, the interview conversations made comprehensive analysis possible as I strived to sense-make from the participants' making-sense of their situation, ministering the double hermeneutic (Smith & Osborn, 2008) of IPA research.

Analysis and Interpretations

In my study, the IPA data analysis process of six steps (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) is used as a constructive and flexible tool to navigate cognitively and practically from descriptive to interpretative insights. As demonstrated in Chapter 5, exercising an iterative, inductive route (Finlay, 2013), data were systematically examined in a manner which initially distilled, then crystallised into temporal meanings, seen initially as defined themes, then recast into pedagogical tenets relating to the process of transformational learning. Data was accessed

through free textual notes with three discrete foci: descriptive comments of the experience, linguistic comments highlighting specific verbal markers, and, conceptual comments encompassing a more theoretical level. Next, connections between the initial notes shaped emergent themes, structured to capture the crucial point of what was said. After completing three of the analytic steps on the first transcript, I extended the methodology to include an additional Sub-Step (3b) to expose with my own experiences and increase interpretive transparency (Chapter 6).

Hence, I found the six steps of IPA analysis (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) effective for my study when used in conjunction with a consistent, reflexive approach and a secure understanding of underpinnings of hermeneutic phenomenology. Through continually writing and revising the data, I unearthed unexpected meanings more powerful than those of my initial assumptions. Being led by the data meant I had to acknowledge and let go of my preconceptions. The act of letting go of previously held ideas is difficult to articulate but reformulating prior assumptions is an essential component of IPA discovery, and its importance can be underplayed when deciding what to include and what to leave out in the final report. The participants' distance learning experiences were clearly important for them and I felt a great responsibility to the participants because they had so willingly donated me their time and stories. I wanted to repay my gratitude by making sure each of their voices were heard and that I extracted every drop of interpretative insight from the data give, so the sample size was selected to allow me to work deeply and thoroughly on each transcript.

Interpretive Insights

In their data, I have seen the lasting, intrinsic effect of their distance-learning course, similar to a transformational learning experience supported by Mezirow (2003). In particular, my discoveries centre on the importance of relationships. Positive and trusting learning partnerships amongst tutors and learners lessen the distance between the learners and their own learning, bringing the experience closer to the self. Hence, my contribution to educational knowledge comes by way of a key interpretative feature of self-connected learning. Self-connected learning requires a nurturing environment within which learners can take control, ownership, and accountability for their own education, helped by a tutor who acts as a facilitator. It is clearly present when the confidence to question replaces a need for answers. In practice, self-connected learning is distinct from technologically focused distance learning (Major, 2015). Attention is placed on people seeing themselves, rather than the technological platform, as the major learning resource.

Therefore, the notion of self-connected learning identified in this study suggests a paradigm shift from technology-orientated to self-orientated online pedagogy. Hence, pedagogic actions need to be linked to pedagogic assumptions. As evidenced in my study, distance learning can serve as a vehicle for self-discovery via embodied experiences, resulting in modifications to how whole person learning is recognised online. Indeed, Rogers argues for freeing the learner to use their body, brain, and emotions when he states; 'Significant learning combines the logical and the intuitive, the intellect and the feelings, the concept and the experience, the idea and the meaning (1983, p. 20). In concluding my study, I propose the need to rethink contemporary distance learning practice, especially in terms of what tutors 'do' and how online learning environments are understood and constructed because, an important part of encouraging self-connection is through recognising the personal and broader scenery of learners' lives. Turning the dialogical flow toward caring for the learner and their learning, rather than task-orientated communication, may unlock possibilities for distance learners to want and feel the need to think about themselves in the context of their own lives. I believe learning for the self can be invigorated, not as a peripheral consequence, but as integral to the mainstream of the educational experience. As a result, I am not advocating more work for tutors, but a different way to think about their work and interactions.

Reflexive appraisal of using IPA

My inexperience of IPA unfolded and I recognised that asking of questions about experiences of distance learning, vicariously includes general experiences of education, family and work. As Heidegger (2011) and Gadamer (2013) reveal, each person's experience differs because of individual historical and cultural contexts. The design of my semi-structured interview attended to the phenomenon under investigation, filtering biographical factors through the data. I found difficulty in separating learning from life, as under the phenomenological lens, experience has a ripple effect. Indeed, the circumstances of the telephone interviews and verification meetings contributed contextual insight in the participants lived experience (van Manen, 2001), which in turn, is greater than their experience of distance learning. I now realise that the phenomena I wanted to investigate is part of their lives, not separate from it. For example, in Adam's world, I heard the need for validation. I listened to Ben's loving management of competing demands, Cate enabled me to understanding her 'Worzel Gummidge' head swap, and Dora made me realise the privilege and sacrifice of caring for others. To focus on addressing the research question, I needed to balance the breadth of exploration with the depth of understanding required.

Therefore, in agreement with Pringle *et al.* (2011) and Callary, Rathwell and Young (2015) observations, the time-consuming and highly involved analytic process is a strength and potential limitation of IPA. My work occupied a minimum of 64 separate analytic elements (see Table 21), without counting the ongoing ebb and flow between reflexive deliberation, writing and constant reference to the transcripts. Each analytic element contributed to the formulation of insight, there were no 'short cuts'. Self-managing my concentration, I commenced each period of study by reviewing my field notes before moving on. Sessions concluded with a written summary of the research tasks undertaken. This routine tuned out the external world, providing focus and engagement with my 'researcher self'.

Activity	Task	Adam	Ben	Cate	Dora
1	Reading and re-reading the transcript	√	√	√	√
2	Listening and listening again to each recording	√	√	√	√
3	Finding descriptive comments	√	√	√	√
4	Finding linguistic comments	√	√	√	√
5	Finding conceptual comments	√	√	√	√
6	Decontextualized reading (reading transcript from back to front)	√	√	√	√
7	Checking initial notes	√	√	√	√
8	Inputting written comments into NVivo	√	√	√	√
9	Reflexively finding and writing echoes commentary	√	√	√	√
10	Developing emerging themes	√	√	√	√
11	Reorganising emerging themes into single case themes	√	√	√	√
12	Cross case analysis (comparing and contrasting content)	√	√	√	√
13	Reorganising single case themes into cross case themes and sub-themes	√	√	√	√
14	Confirming cross case thematic picture representing single case themes	√	√	√	√
16	Refining and recasting themes into useful pedagogical tenets	√	√	√	√

Table 21: Analytic elements for each transcript

My IPA experience has taught me that keeping on track with each analytic process demands organisation, extensive record keeping, self-awareness, and strategic time management. These skills developed experientially as the analysis evolved. Planning was particularly problematic as the analysis was led by the data and preconceptions recognised and factored

out, allowing as open a view as possible. Indeed, it was impossible to predict the time necessary for each analytic step; each took much longer than anticipated. As time went on, I learnt to accept that each voyage into the data was another learning opportunity and my initial frustrations dissipated with my increasing sense of gratitude. The intellectual hurdles and moments of clarity equally contributed to the development of an optimistic attitude which I believe is essential in order to get the most out of the data and myself. To find optimism when the going got tough, I recalled Ben's words '*because it is important*' to motivate myself and think through why the research ground was tough going on occasion. Consequently, my field notes became a reference point for reflexive appraisal and intellectual progress, inseparable because interpretative work demands consistent critical awareness of all research 'happenings'. My journaling gave me ongoing checkpoints to ensure that I observed the data in terms of the participants lived experiences, managed my own influence and referred to the existing literature (Finlay, 2009).

Key Links to Theory / Literature

Transformative learning is influential in understanding how adults learn (Dirkx, 1998; Cranton & Kasl, 2012), but the theory is often poorly translated in educational research (Taylor & Snyder, 2012; King 2017). The interpretive insights of my study provide an intellectual bridge between transformational learning and adult distance learning. I have tackled the challenge for educational research to maintain fidelity with the theory (Taylor & Cranton, 2013; Natanasabapathy *et al.*, 2011) and, at the same time, addressed the distance learning literature citing pedagogical problems with online opportunities for deep learning (Offir *et al.*, 2008; Newman, 2012).

Self-connected learning is underpinned by transformative learning theory (Mezirow 2003; Taylor 2007) because learning connected to the self is believed to foster present meaning and ongoing significance (Rogers, 1967; Mezirow & Taylor; 2011). As indicated in Chapter 2, transformative learning theory suggests that conceptualisations of the world can be advanced through the conscious review of accepted 'frames of reference,' that unintentionally hold in place habits of mind (habitual modes of cognition, affect and behaviour) and unexamined points of view (Mezirow, 1997). A person's social and cultural experience influences frames of reference, so modification occurs as a result of problem solving (instrumental learning) or through deliberating problems with others (communicative learning). These types of activities become educational in a transformative sense when the learner is able to evaluate reflectively (or 'reframe') their previous assumptions upon which frames of reference are founded.

Mezirow's (2000) formulation is grounded in his argument for the four different ways people learn i) by expanding prevailing frames of reference, ii) through new frames of reference being learnt, iii) transformation in habits of mind, iv) transformation of points of view. However, my work shows that the process of transformational learning is also supported through the work of the tutors. Therefore, in contrast to the distance learning literature that connects learners with content via structured activities and interaction with peers (Salmon, 2004; Haythornthwaite & Andrews, 2011; Major, 2015), my study positions the tutor/learner relationship as key to the embodied conceptualisation of self-connected learning.

The affective realisation of being 'cared for' is a powerful driver for psycho-pedagogic understanding, achievement, and transformative processes. Care is experienced through the organisation of learning as well as facilitated in technologically-mediated tutor/learner communications. In Heideggerian thinking, the multifaceted experience of care seen in the data, responds to the notion of *intersubjectivity*. The relational manner in which we engage with the world means that other people and other things can influence our experience. This implies that care, pedagogy and distance learning are interrelated in the transformational learning process, with the role of the online tutor acting as an essential component for connecting learning with the self. So, rather than creating dependency, academic care encourages autonomy because the embodied experiences of self-efficacy and self-regulation (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2011) acclimatise learners to what Aspin *et al.* (2012) refer to as the attitudes and skills necessary for lifelong learning.

Therefore, refocusing the distance learning experience toward the *whole* person creates the potential for progression in knowledge, skills, and competency in the domains of cognition, affect and, action. Learning is no longer the information gathering, task-based exercise that pedagogical research reveals to be ineffectual for promoting understanding (Bowden & Marton, 2004; Baxter Magolda 2014); learning is re-directed back to the self. Consequently, self-connection to learning is not intended to be a new addition to the pedagogy of contemporary higher education (Jarvis, 2012; Pring, 2015), rather a propositional reminder, of the embodied experience of learning online.

Hence, self-connected learning differs from the similar notions of self-directed learning and student-centred learning. To Knowles self-directed learning is 'a process in which individuals take the initiative without the help of others in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating goals, identifying human and material resources, and evaluating learning outcomes' (1975, p. 18). To Nanney student-centred learning is, 'a broad teaching approach that encompasses replacing lectures with active learning, integrating self-paced learning programs and/or

cooperative group situations, ultimately holding the student responsible for his own advances in education' (2004, p. 1). In contrast, for me self-connected learning is, 'the embodied experience of learning for the self, nurtured in a caring environment to empower ongoing self-efficacy, curiosity and choice'.

Original Contribution

Contribution to Educational Knowledge

- The voice of the alumni, from a specific course gives phenomenological insight into the experience of distance learning which previously, is missing from the literature
- The terminology of distance learning requires review in terms of how Higher Education Institutions and faculty members understand this mode of delivery from a learner perspective
- Transformational learning outcomes are more evident after course completion
- Self-connected learning is a pedagogically useful conceptualisation, encapsulating the embodied experience of distance learning discovered from the data
- Self-connected learning is promoted by five pedagogical tenets which together offer an understanding of the process for transformational (online) learning.

Contribution to IPA Research Practice

- The methodological extension of Sub-Step 3b Echoes demonstrates innovation in research practice. My work shows one way of translating the theory of reflexivity into IPA research activity. The concept of echoes helps to explain how reflexivity can be understood and used. Finding a way to gain access, work with and share inner world thinking to assist with the sense making clarifies the researcher position (and re-positioning) to the external world. Importantly, field-note journaling to capture the 'echoes' resonating from the data, bridges the gap between reading about the double hermeneutic and the cognitive, affective and practical implementation into the process of IPA research.

I believe that the process and insights of this study have the potential to impact on how faculty and learning organisations view and engage with distance learners. I am using and exploring a range of opportunities to disseminate my work. At faculty level I am consulting and working alongside colleagues to develop continuing professional development resources for distance-

learning tutors and new 'self-connected learning' materials for students. My knowledge and experience of IPA is now an accepted part of my teaching role at undergraduate, masters and doctoral level. In my university, I am taking my ideas forward and sharing my insights in the implementation of the strategic plan to establish a new digital campus. To contribute further to my academic community, I plan to publish articles and develop conference material with this thesis as their basis, particularly relating to the pedagogic issue of self-connected learning and the methodological issue of 'echoes'.

Limitations: The Parameters Framing the View

Qualitative educational research presents an array of dilemmas and possibilities and throughout the research process, as I reflected on progress, I became increasingly sensitive to the limitations of my research. Indeed, Murray and Beglar point out; 'No study is perfect, and one form of intellectual honesty involves pointing out areas where [the] study could have been better' (2009, p. 183). Therefore, the limitations I have observed in my study can help situate the insight contributions within the wider body of research knowledge. For example, Smith and colleagues (2010, p.56) argue that IPA can offer 'a rich, detailed, first person account of their experiences' which aligns to the underlying rationale my research. However, the insights identified are brief and time-bound snapshots of the perceptions of a small cohort of self-selecting alumni, raising questions regarding the representativeness and motivations for their participation. In this case, I must acknowledge that the experiences of those who completed the course and my involvement have influenced the insights reported.

The limitations of this study reflect the challenges of managing the ethical dilemmas and role duality of the insider-researcher. Asselin (2003) observed that role confusion occurs in most research, but noted a higher risk when the researcher is familiar with the research setting or participants through a role other than that of researcher. Although I deliberately chose to select members of the alumni who had not had contact with me personally or the university for a year or more, this does not guarantee immunity from fundamental problems associated with insider research. Prior knowledge may lead to mistaken assumptions, creating an inherent and potentially pervasive bias. Specifically, despite the time lapse between the participants completing and their interviews, my insider status raised issues of power, anonymity and access which could have been overlooked or underplayed. Any concerns about possible coercion, compliance and access to privileged information have to be weighed against the benefits of giving voice to an under-represented group, who, without this research would not have been noticed or heard.

With insider-researchers limitations can transpire from selectivity. Important information particularly that of a sensitive nature, may be withheld or skewed to fit the participant's perceptions of the practitioner-researcher role. In this study, I was ever conscious of perceived power and how this might sway decisions to participate or influence what the participants would or would not say. Indeed, I was careful to avoid assuming knowledge of the participants' views and concerns, which my own tacit knowledge might blind me to. Conversely, the participants could have taken as read what is already known and not offered a full account of their experience. Equally, they might have revealed information about other people, and situations connected to me, leading to further role conflict and the potential struggle of 'loyalty tugs' (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007, p. 70). Aware of such pitfalls, I will have had a different alertness or sensitivity to the information or issues raised by the participants compared to those who stand outside the research frame; those without insider knowledge who might have missed issues that I picked up on. Either way the 'human factor' creates inherent limitations to the process of qualitative research.

Overall, my experience of the community of practice under investigation might, if left unchecked, cloud my perceptions and research actions. The result could conceivably be viewed as an interview and interpretative analysis shaped and guided by the core aspects of my experience and not the participants'. Furthermore, without significant reflexive appraisal, I might have emphasised the shared factors between myself and the participants and de-emphasised factors that were discrepant, or vice versa. Hence, closeness to the situation has the potential to hinder the researcher-self from seeing all dimensions of the bigger picture. My methods needed to be rigorous for the insights gained to be robust.

Early in the research process I considered selecting participants from an entirely different course to mediate against the insider-researcher concerns. On investigation, I realised that each distance learning course has a distinct style of delivery, different priorities and diverse staffing issues and the specialist nature of the course I lead made comparison difficult. So I based my decision-making on my initial reasons for enrolling for an EdD: to develop myself as an educationalist while benefiting my routine work. I needed to understand whether what I do 'works' and importantly, how what I do works for learners. As my ontological inclination is toward inductive research, the generalisation of prospective findings would not be possible so I would have to find helpful elements through an evaluation of transferability, resulting in different limitations to my study.

Moreover, I now understand that whichever sample or data collection route I had taken, my choice to use IPA means that I not only have to face my own bias and assumptions but also

expose these to my readers to allow them to test the robustness of my work. Practice-based research is messy and ethically complex, because the work may well highlight both welcome and unwelcome aspects of our professional lives that need to be acknowledged, understood and addressed. My study shows that if we are to do research within our everyday practice, then time consuming reflexive vigilance is needed to the contextual and implicative forces that visibly or discreetly influence our actions.

Although I share a practice-based language and experiential base with the study participants, I must make it clear that I have not had students' subjective experience of what it is like to be a distance learner on an undergraduate course. I chose IPA to seek the richness of the lived experience, but a philosophically driven, methodological expanse unfolded before me as my research advanced. I had to learn to use and convey complex philosophical ideas, in ways that are meaningful to the research and accessible to the reader (Smith & Osborn, 2008; Norlyk & Harder, 2010). My constant dealings with new, unfamiliar and seemingly unreachable ways of thinking, particularly in relationship to the major hermeneutic phenomenologists (i.e. Heidegger, Gadamer and Merleau-Ponty) forced me to traverse an unsteady and unsettling research ground and this lack of prior or comprehensive knowledge was itself a challenge to the rigour of the research.

In practice, my novice researcher status proved both a limitation and an asset. As I drew closer to my research question, an ever-evolving vista of phenomenological thinking opened up before me, exposing a more subtle and intricate proposition for enquiry than anticipated that further distinguished the 'insider' from the 'participant' view. Influenced only by the unfurling data, without previous tacit research experience to draw on and balancing the dilemmas of my insider status, I found reflexivity to be a crucial and demanding methodological skill. The process necessitated mastery because when taking a snapshot of the participants' experience, I saw myself in the phenomenological picture too, not solely as the course lead, but as a person with a past, present and future.

Recommendations for Educational Practice

The overarching recommendations presented here demonstrate the potential utility of the insights gained from this study. However, as explained in Chapter 1 my intention for this hermeneutic research process is to shed light on important, though possibly forgotten aspects of our experience as a means to 'compel attention and provoke further thinking' (Crowther *et al.*, p.827). In Chapter 8, the three areas identified – of care, embodiment and empathy relating

to self-connected learning are encapsulated here in the pedagogic and practical application of nurturing, stimulating and promoting ownership of learning. Unlike attempts to fully implement the learning theory of heutagogy, mentioned in Chapter 2, I believe the ideas associated with self-connected learning may be viably applied. When the self is connected with the learning, independent and critical reflection is more likely to occur and be shared with others. Therefore, my practice-based recommendations include how self-connected learning may be thought of, as well as observed. Attending to the learner rather than to the technology affords distance learning opportunities for deep, transformative education because of the greater humanistic-orientation. I aim to use the insights from this study to influence my own and potentially to others routine practice, without major disruption to current academic processes. In other words, my recommendations for practice are formed from the idea that a small change can make a big difference.

As this is a professional doctorate, I am participating in activities and finding opportunities to share what my insights might 'look like' in practice (Burgess & Wellington, 2010). Hence, recommendations derived from this thesis are in action, both practically in my routine, educational work and through the dissemination of my ideas. In the BSc that I lead, more visible emphasis is given to recognising and promoting the individualised, self-connected nature of the online learning experience. For example, further examination of the course governing and administering procedures has led to the implementation of a more detailed and nuanced evaluation of student progress and tutor activity at the end of each trimester. Specifically, the course review includes two new agenda items;

- 1) Individual learner progress is shared with the next module tutor to enable a better transition between modules. Key areas for development are identified, along with information about helpful learning strategies identified by the learner
- 2) An ongoing process of peer review is now used by the tutoring team and this provides information about tutorial good practice which is discussed, collated and adopted in the subsequent academic period

In terms of assessment, the patchwork text assignment (Winter, 2003) for the subject specialist modules is refined to incorporate an initial 'patch' directed to taking ownership of learning. Learners are asked to consider why they are doing the module and what they hope to gain. This patch is then linked to the final patch and a discussion of application to practice takes place. Hence, the assignment structure now comes full circle by framing the start and end in the students' own experience.

An academic staff resource is under construction, focussing on how to end communications with distance learners. The material is aimed to help colleagues recognise that the way we 'leave' learners is an inherent, but often missed part of engagement and explicitly self-connection. From the data, the participants' affective responses to tutorial support influenced how they viewed their learning experience and either inhibited or contributed to self-connection. Scenarios provided by the BSc team highlight issues, provide reflective questions and offer suggestions. Following feedback from colleagues and learners, the online resource will be improved and made available to new and existing tutors.

I am also working on pedagogic workshops for academic colleagues, underpinned by the idea of self-connected learning which highlights the active, complementary roles of tutors and learners. Tutors set learners in motion to make their own discoveries by linking and evaluating existing knowledge in the context of their own experiences (Dewey, 1933; Knowles, 1975). The session content takes forward a humanistic approach, where the 'inner world' of the learner is respected as tutors offer different levels of support during the learning experience. Tangible examples are used to examine the tutor role, starting as a navigational aid, then a critical friend and finally a sounding box for self-directed ideas. Throughout the transitional stages of the tutorial relationship, the promotion of individual self-esteem and confidence are central to all interactions because in humanistic educational philosophy, how a person feels about their learning is more important than what they think or do. Therefore, the confidence to be curious is necessary given that beyond the academy, learners must be cognitively, affectively and practically equipped and ready to progress by themselves, when tutors and courses are no longer accessible (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010; QAA, 2014). Higher education plays a commanding role in preparing learners for an unknown future, so the aims of undergraduate courses and the tutorial support given, must encompass the capability to search and critically select knowledge and problem solve, resulting in self-directed, knowledge producers.

From a more conceptual point of view, the recommendations summarised in Table 22, focus on areas for wider dissemination. Indeed, the perspective of self-connected learning is generating interest as my ideas are contributing to the discourse of distance learning in my faculty, university and wider educational community through attending meetings, presenting at local, national and international conferences, and in published papers.

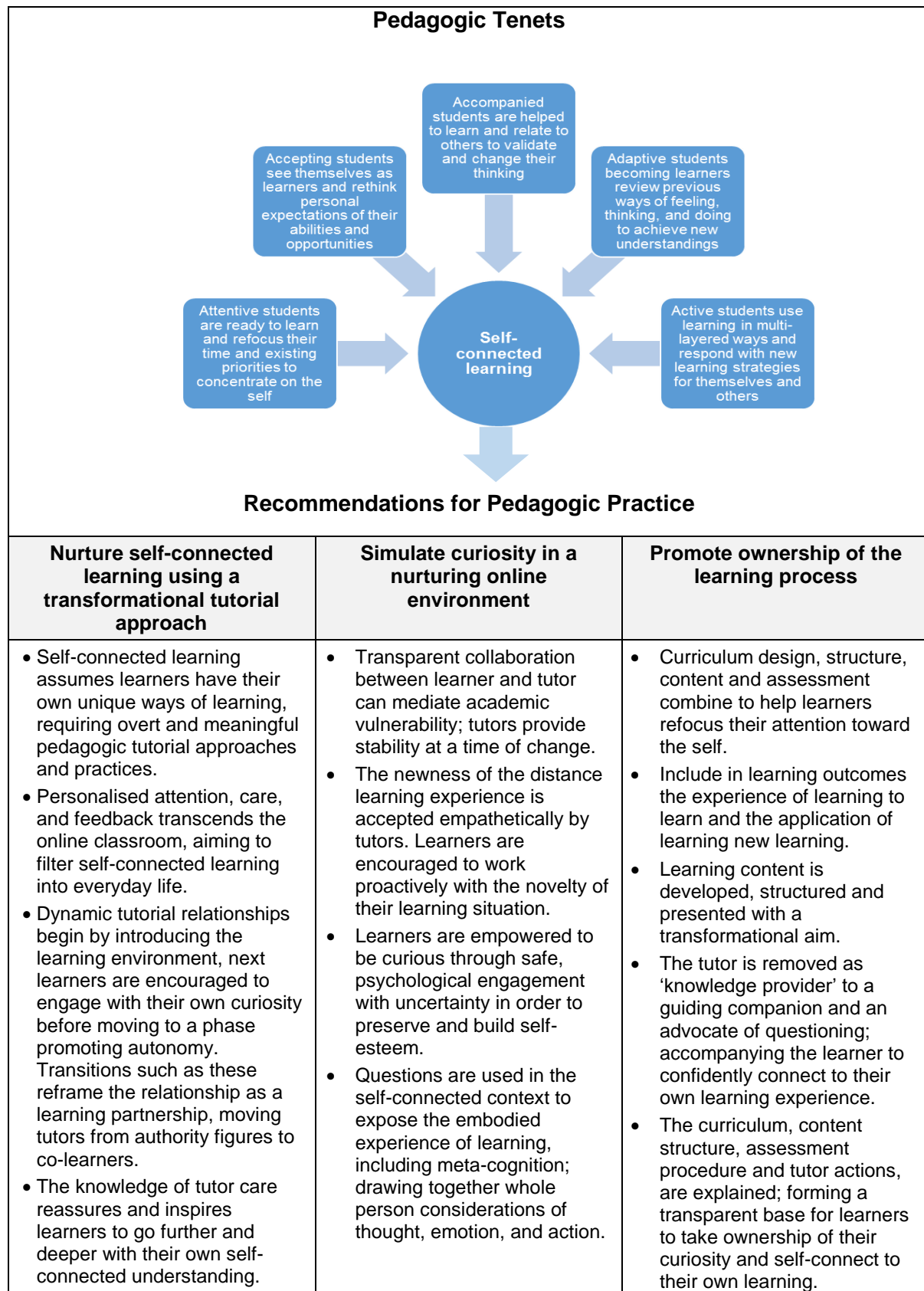


Table 22: Summary of recommendations and application to educational practice

Recommendations for IPA Research Practice

My recommendations for future IPA research practice have developed during the course of this study. Coming to IPA as a novice researcher, I took a 'fresh eyes' approach and followed the guidance given by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009). However, as with all guidance, it is up to the practitioner to make his/her own judgements. I soon discovered reading about IPA to be very different to the practice of IPA. IPA is not confined to the well-documented 'six steps', instead the approach requires a number of attributes from the researcher, and these are where my recommendations are situated;

- From a knowledge perspective, researchers' need a secure grounding in the key architects of hermeneutic phenomenology (Heidegger, Gadamer and Merleau-Ponty) to bring IPA to life in the field.
- Given the importance of writing in the reflexive process detailed in this study, further investigation and discussion in the literature about the use of field notes is indicated, specifically in the context of IPA research.
- Based on the insights from this research, IPA researchers' and doctoral supervisors must be aware from the outset, that the six steps for data analysis are not intended to operationalise the complexity of analytic work.
- The methodological extension of Sub-Step 3b (echoes) in this study points to the need for innovations to be shared in the IPA literature about reflexively engaging with, and taking ownership of the data.

Transferability

As discussed in Chapter 6: Reflexive Positioning, interpretive phenomenological studies are not intended to deliver generalizable findings for practice (Holloway, 2005; Smith, 2009). However my detailed application of IPA does allow for transferability. Mindful that context is highly significant, I have presented a research account which is rich, transparent, and linked to appropriate literature so that readers can assess the value of transferability for themselves. Readers are invited into these temporal insights of what it is like to be a distance learner (Crowther *et al.*, 2017), with the expectation that the story of this research will mean different things to different people. I accept that the homogenous sample used in this research is arguably narrow, potentially causing difficulty with transferability judgements and links. This appears an unavoidable tension within IPA research. To mediate reader concerns, throughout this research process, I have acknowledged and clarified the strengths, limitations and

constraints. Nevertheless the findings of this small-scale research study are available to the continuing discourse of transformational learning in other adult distance learning settings, if others feel transferability is appropriate. This is especially so in terms of the process of transformation and the emergence of transformational outcomes after formal learning courses have ended. However, my proposition of self-connected learning may resonant more with smaller distance-learning courses (as opposed to Massive Open Online Courses). The reason is that personalised contact with online tutors is key to engendering an ethos (in this case, an individualised, embodied understanding of distance learning) through a nurturing, online culture. Whether or not distance learning approaches aim to create a similar ethos is an interesting point of dialogue between the fields.

Focusing on the Wider Issues

My study supports the conclusion that 'in-course' evaluation is unlikely to pick up whether transformation has occurred (Taylor & Cranton, 2013), as it is more conducive to immediate, externally-based appraisals (e.g. organisational elements, convenience and quality of online facilities). Pedagogically, opportunities to reveal, discuss and evidence the components of an individualised transformational process can be found in self-connected appraisal. In this respect, appraisal can be considered to connect the self to the content, but more importantly, connect the embodied self to the learning experience. Heidegger (2011) identified *dasein* in the 'gaps' in the 'taken-for-granted', and self-connected appraisal highlights what these 'gaps' might contain, offering clues to transformational processes. In this study, the participant's degree-level qualification is not evidence of transformation, but validation of listening to, and trusting the inner voice to become more confident in ongoing experiences of learning.

Implications for Further Research

The stance taken in my study furthers the scope of interpretative phenomenological methodology for educational investigation and particularly in the area of adult, distance learning. Educationalists are well placed to enquire about their own, routine practice and understand more of a defined phenomenon because professionally a 'strong relation' (van Manen, 1990, p. 33) can be forged with the topic in question. Concerned with the ordinary, phenomenological research turns our attention away from things, to bring our experience into focus (Smith, 2016). In developing a phenomenological understanding, the central concept is not that of knowledge, but of how meaning manifests. Unlike other methodologies attached to

the nature of the external world, phenomenological enquiry is interested in our access and interactions with it. The apparent then becomes the extraordinary, because taken-for-granted thinking is scrutinised with intense inquisitiveness. As Pring (2015, p. 206) argues, philosophy begins when 'one feels puzzled about the meaning of what one is doing'.

In terms of further research inside the technologically dominant environment of distance learning, the struggle to find meaning, in a phenomenological sense, is pertinent. While my research may be considered as a small-scale, idiographic study, my proposition is endorsed by Smith, Flowers and Larkin's (2009, p. 202) assertion that IPA is concerned with micro-level analysis, but such analyses are complementary to, and augment, 'the development of more macro accounts'. The reason is that educational research and pedagogic practice occur in a complex social world, involving the people in it, each having their own unique meanings, assumptions, commitments and practices (Pring, 2015). From my work in educational research, it seems that the spirit of phenomenology has the potential to uncover nuanced experiences of learning and provide clues as to why distance learning may be more successful for some learners than others. Research 'going behind the screen', stripping back the technological façade, is shown by my study to support the potential for hastening educationalists to further decipher how, where and why distance learning is experienced, as well as appreciating more about learning impact. With the accumulation of this type of data, a more robust grasp of the embodied, transformational consequences of distance learning could be formed, suggesting the further use of phenomenological hermeneutic enquiry for educational research.

Within Educational Research:

- The concept of self-connected learning requires continued examination to understand more about if, and how, learning for the self happens in other academic arenas.
- To extend the insights gained from the alumni, the experiences of non-completers are a potential source of understanding about the challenges of distance learning. Taking an oppositional perspective may illuminate more facets of the provisional concept of self-connected learning.
- My conclusions and the work of Baxter Magolda and King (2012) indicate the impact of learning requires further exploration. Follow up studies of the alumni, across disciplines, could supplement existing course evaluation and contribute to the pedagogic progression of technologically mediated modes of delivery.

Within IPA (research practice)

- In light of my inclusion of Sub-Step 3b, it is probable that further investigation into how IPA researchers can use reflexivity in relation to the six steps of IPA could strengthen the methodological approach.

Reflecting on the Process

On the first day of my doctoral programme, I wrote myself a message in the course handbook: 'one day I will look back and see how far I have come'. I now realise the reflexive demands of IPA work enabled my researcher 'self' to grow from my personal and professional self. The EdD programme empowered me with the academic courage to disentangle myself from the confines of self-imposed barriers, and to re-identify with my academic role. Indeed, I could never have imagined being where I find myself now. Personal and professional development is evidenced in my enhanced working knowledge of the philosophical foundations of IPA, my critical understanding of the qualitative research process, and my ethical stance to phenomenological enquiry (Walker, 2007). In my doctoral journey, distinct and unexpected insights into my routine work served to meet the challenge of finding my academic identity. Byrne (2001) considers critical self-awareness as essential for acknowledging the influences that researchers bring to their research and, I now argue, in the dissemination of their research. Now able to share my insights, ideas, and inspirations with a wider audience, I believe myself to be a participating member of the academic community. Indeed, I view reflexivity as integral to interpretative phenomenological research and to establishing myself as an educational researcher.

My research demonstrates reflexivity to be a time consuming endeavour, requiring intellectual space, affective awareness, and overall, committed participation. In terms of IPA, a sustained reflexive approach is heavily reliant on the researcher taking the role as the central analytic instrument. Therefore, along with Pringle *et al.* (2011), my own learning experience has proved to be frustrating, exhausting, and exhilarating for me. I have lived experience of Heidegger's caution that phenomenology 'never makes things easier, but only more difficult' (2000, p. 12). Likewise, I have learnt that the double hermeneutic is about giving of oneself as much as it is about taking data from others. In my view, IPA research comprises reading, writing, conceptualizing, re-writing, and continually developing impressions, whilst maintaining and clarifying the purpose of addressing a specific research question.

In the final stages of this thesis, I recognise the tone of the initial themes and then the refined pedagogical tenets resonate with my professional background, yet I also accept that an alternative approach to this thesis may have been possible when studied through a different professional or academic lens. However, I am confident that I have achieved what I set out to do. Thus, following Yardley's (2000) examination of validity in qualitative studies, I appreciate now that the nature of unforeseen insights gives a greater sense of validity. Whilst I do not believe that research has to be surprising to be deemed good, surprising research suggests to me that something useful has been found and that this is something that I can now work with in my professional practice. In this respect, the idiographic nature of my research process and final insights positively respond to Yardley's (2008) quality principles of i) sensitivity to context, ii) commitment and rigour, iii) transparency and coherence, and iv) impact and importance. Each quality principle is carefully and coherently embedded into the IPA methodology selected and ethical research design (Arthur *et al.*, 2012), in order to hear the voice of the alumni and inspire the presentation of a transparent interpretive piece of work (Smith, 2011). The alumni proved an essential resource, whereby potential negative power differentials between 'student and tutor', gave way to an open and positive reflective process. By deliberately concentrating on the participants' experiential narratives, and using interpretative and hermeneutic scrutiny, I have been careful with my assertions (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). In contrast to Burgess and Wellington's (2010) evidence of the paucity of transfer from doctoral research to practice, I contend that my study provides purposeful points of learning and discussion for the distance learning community.

Thesis Summary

This doctoral thesis is constructed in accordance with the Research Degrees Regulations, Seventeenth Edition (ARU, 2016) and demonstrates the assessment criteria for Level 8 (Regulations 10.18-10.26, p. 92). During my EdD journey, I have systematically acquired a critical understanding of the experience of distance learning by conducting research in accordance with academic and professional ethical standards. My study shows an advanced level of independent reasoning aligned to the conceptualisation, design and achievement of a project, generating new knowledge.

Reflection and critical examination of my professional activity is apparent in my treatment of my research question, use of reflexivity and subsequent insights for practice. The findings from my study are effectively communicated, with a clear fidelity to IPA. Therefore, this thesis combines theoretical and professional-practical viewpoints, in order to create a reciprocal

critique, leading to the reformulation of theory and of my professional practice. The outcomes from this EdD enquiry make evident the academic qualities and transferable skills needed to take myself forward as an empirical phenomenologist.

So, to conclude, this part of my research story is not an ending but the beginning of a more insightful, knowledgeable and participatory relationship with my educational practice and community. I comprehend better now the complex dynamics in the practice, process and outcomes of distance learning. At the start, I could not have anticipated the cognitive roads I have walked or the affective consequences of what I have seen. Led by the data, I found myself in initially familiar territory, but as I looked further I realised I knew little of this new place – the view of the distance learner. Charting my progress, I maintained clear fidelity to the methodology and method of IPA to attain greater richness and the development of five pedagogical tenets. My study provides alternative knowledge and understanding to the experience of distance learning, as previous qualitative studies focusing on alumni are hard to find. My decision to use in-depth, telephone interviews (Irvine, 2011), and transcript verification meetings with the participants highlights the value of qualitative research methods in accessing an under researched group. The participants' gifts of data allowed me to produce an ethically astute, in-depth, temporal snapshot of four graduates, all of whom completed the same course, at the same time.

The participants understood their experiences in various ways, but all agreed on the significance of positive, trusting relationships with tutors as influential in developing ongoing confidence to be curious. Achievements from this study include a better understanding of the potential for distance learning to be a transformative process, cultivated by a nurturing online environment. Distance learning, in the context of my research, is seen as an embodied, self-connected experience, with implications extending from the course to the new routines of everyday life. Thus self-connected learning may be thought of as a powerful driver for longer-term impact, than purely content acquisition. Furthermore, I conclude that distance learning has the potential to offer opportunities for transformational learning, but that transformation takes time and overt, personalised tutorial support. And, in terms of evaluating transformational consequences, impact is mostly recognised after course completion, and only in the participants' own view. Overall, this research has generated new insights, questions, and suggestions for the direction for future pedagogic research.

My work positions online education in a discovery-orientated pedagogy and, as a result, this concluding chapter combines theory with potential practical application. The recommendations generated are closely situated in the interpretations found in the research

data and are directed toward future practice, policy and, research. With the continuing popularity of distance learning in higher education, this study is an illustration of why adjustments are needed concerning the role of technology in teaching and learning in higher education. Rather than antagonistic, new conversations about the integration of humanistic educational ideals can go hand-in-hand with advancements in technology, when distance learning is understood as an embodied experience. As distance learning reasonably offers extensive possibilities for learners to connect meaningfully with their own learning and for their experience to have longer-term relevance, the challenge for online educationalists is to work out how this may be best accomplished. Self-connected learning represents one proposition to meet some of the demands and needs of a forward facing higher education system.

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Appendices

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Appendix A: Level 6 Descriptors


(Adapted from QAA, 2014)

Level 6 – Undergraduate Award with Honours	
Students demonstrate:	Qualification typically indicates the ability to:
Organised and transparent conceptualisations of the core aspects of their study, attaining coherent, in-depth knowledge informed by their discipline.	Review, confirm, develop and use new understanding appropriate to their discipline.
Ability to accurately establish and deploy techniques of analysis and enquiry in their discipline.	Critically appraise assumptions, concepts and arguments in order to judge and frame relevant questions to work toward practice-based solutions.
Conceptual understanding enabling: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Construction of robust arguments, problem solving, employing ideas and techniques found at the forefront of their discipline. • Description and commentary of contemporary research. 	Appropriately communicate to a range of audiences (discipline and non-discipline specific) information, ideas, questions and potential solutions.
Awareness of the insecurity, ambiguity and boundaries of knowledge.	Reflect and evaluate personal and/or work professional experience in view of own scholarship and contemporary statutory regulations.
Management of own learning.	Translate qualities and skills necessary for the implementation of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiative • Personal responsibility • Decision-making in complex and unpredictable contexts • Further education

Appendix B: Research Proposal

(accepted 26-09-14)



Anglia Ruskin University Research Degrees Sub Committee Research Proposal Form	
APPLICATION FOR APPROVAL OF A RESEARCH PROPOSAL FOR THE AWARD OF PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATE AND PROFESSIONAL MASTERS (DBA, EDD, DPROF, MPROF)	
Notes of Guidance to Applicants Seeking Approval from Stage 1 to Stage 2	
<p>This form should be completed electronically and then returned to your Programme Director by normally no later than 24 months after initial registration for part-time candidates and 12 months for full-time candidates. Candidates should prepare and submit their proposal after completion of their Stage 1 papers.</p> <p>Your research proposal will be considered by your Programme Director and a member of the senior research staff in the Faculty.</p> <p>In formulating a research proposal applicants must seek the advice and guidance of the Supervisory Team. The proposal should not exceed more than 1,000 words (excluding references and those sections marked with an asterisk*). Anything in excess of 1,000 words will not be considered. Please provide specific responses relating to your research for each of the questions.</p>	
Statement by the Applicant	
<p>I confirm that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) I have received and read a copy of the Anglia Ruskin's Research Degrees Regulations and the Research Ethics & Governance for Human Research, Guidelines for Applying for Ethical Approval at Anglia Ruskin (ii) My application complies with the above Guidelines for Applying for Ethical Approval. The Research Proposal Ethics Checklist is attached (iii) I understand I must defend my thesis in English (iv) I will undertake that if the final submission includes material other than written text, it will comply with the requirements of Anglia Ruskin (v) I have discussed this proposal with my Supervisory Team and understand their roles and responsibilities (vi) I understand that, except with the specific permission of the University, during the period of my registration I may not be a candidate for a higher degree in this or any other institution (vii) I understand that should I be working on a project having commercial sponsors or commercial potential, that I shall enter into a confidentiality agreement and assign my Intellectual Property Rights to Anglia Ruskin University, unless I am employed by the organisation funding the research <p>I wish to be accepted as a candidate on Stage 2 of the Professional Doctorate at Anglia Ruskin University on the basis of the details given in this application.</p>	
Signed: 	Date:

Type of Award Sought			
Professional Masters (MProf)			<input type="checkbox"/>
Professional Doctorate (DProf/DBA/EdD)			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Personal Details			
SID Number:	0925492	Title:	Mrs
Surname:	Goldspink	First Names:	Sally
Address:	Rivington, The Street, Redgrave, Diss, Norfolk.		
Post Code:	IP22 1RP	Telephone:	07578737605
E-mail:	sally.goldspink@anglia.ac.uk		
Place of Work:	Anglia Ruskin University, Young Street Site, Cambridge.		
Post Code:	CB1 1PT	Telephone:	0845 196 5507
E-mail:	sally.goldspink@anglia.ac.uk		
Will you be located in the UK for the duration of your studies? (please tick)			Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
Supervisory Team			
First Supervisor Name:		Dr Phil Long	
Second Supervisor Name:		Dr Geraldine Davis	
*STAGE 1 PAPERS			
Please give title and an abstract of each Stage 1 paper (300 word limit for each abstract)			
<u>Paper 1</u>			
Title: <u>The Professional Practitioner. A Workplace Study</u> Abstract: This initial piece of work detailed how my personal experiences and professional practice have contributed to my participation in this professionally-orientated educational doctorate. Using Mezirow's (2000) seven stages of reflection, I was able to deeply consider the evolution of my particular research focus. This allowed me to recognise how my past experiences have created my initial interest in the affective components of distance learning for adult learners and the possible associations with helping relationships. I explored my conceptions of self and located my ontological premise as; <i>"1) people are people, despite the labels society attaches to them and 2) learning can influence change. On the one hand apparently straightforward, on the other a kaleidoscope of human experience. This reasoning is consistent with internal-idealist ontology, whereby I cannot view or make judgements of the external world without considering my own internally driven realities (Adams 2003; Arthur, et al 2012)". (Excerpt from Paper 1, p8).</i> Through reading, reflection and discussion I made significant developments in understanding my current role, professionalism, and research position. I discovered that my interest was less about nomothetic outcomes of instruction but directed toward an idiosyncratic, qualitative understanding of how adult-oriented, distance education may provide 'the facilitation of change and learning' (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994, p.152). I was also able to confirm and support my assumption that professional integrity is inherently linked to deliberations as to what determines credible educational research and the connection to my future ethically-based research practice. The conclusions generated provided an understanding of the need to equip myself with transferable skills to fulfil and extend the requirements of contemporary educational practice whilst enabling me to justify my future research area as I illustrated my commitment to becoming an active participant within the educational, research community.			
<u>Paper 2</u>			
Title: <u>A Narrative Literature Review Exploring Personal Significance and the Longer Term Impact of Asynchronous, Adult Distance Learning.</u> This literature review afforded me the opportunity to scope the current evidence-base and recognise how widespread adoption of online-learning has necessitated innovation in respect to			

understanding quality, efficacy and impact (Wilson & Parrish, 2010; Garrison, 2011; Ossiannilsson & Landgren; 2012). I discovered that this is easier in the short term through achievement of specified learning outcomes and course evaluations, but more challenging when considering impact from a longitudinal perspective (Magolda & King, 2012) due to the paucity of data within the evidence-base especially within the arena of distance learners. Hence this was where the 'gap' in the literature was located. This is because, many research projects, doctoral studies and books grapple with cognitively endorsed aspects of distance learning, such as content, structure, technological design and efficiency (Salmon 2004; Haythornthwaite & Andrews 2011; Garrison 2011), whereas Boyer, Maher and Kirkman (2006), Veletsianos (2010) and Wilson, Parrish and Dunlap (2011) advise educators to become concerned with broader aspects of learning, requiring a shift in ideation from technologically-based toward more person-centred understandings of learning outcomes; raising the central the question of – *what are we doing all this for?*

From a transformational, humanist perspective, learning contributes to individual growth and consequently can have positive effects on others. It is however presently unclear within the existing evidence base whether there are determinable factors within the technologically-mediated learning experience that connect significant learning to longer term benefit.

Consequently, a definable research problem emerged through the questioning of what students are actually gaining personally and professionally from asynchronous online, undergraduate learning. As a result, my research is innovative and illustrative of the need to move beyond initial appraisals of completion, toward a deeper level of learning and consequence.

Paper 3

Title: Developing A Professional Research Approach

Abstract: Denzin and Lincoln's (2013) five phases of the research process provided the structure for this discussion. Following the discovery of a gap within the evidence base surrounding the longer-term, personalised consequences of adult, asynchronous distance learning, this paper offered a comprehensive justification for my chosen methodological stance. To determine the student's perceptions, an ethically sound, exploratory study using an inductive, qualitative methodology was required. I explore a number of options before deciding on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA, is founded on three key areas of philosophical thought; phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography, and is considered to be an approach, process and method (Smith, Flowers & Larkin 2011). The approach is noted to be of particular benefit for research such as mine, where there are novel questions, unclear issues and where researchers seek to understand change.

However, IPA is more generally affiliated to healthcare research, so the use in the educational field is innovative and defensible because epistemologically, interest is located in *sense-making* rather than bound to a particular context. IPA was also attractive because it promotes retrospective, self-based appraisal which is methodologically congruent with the research question (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013) and recognises the biography of the researcher to enhance insight and authenticity. Ethical considerations were considered in detail within the criteria set by Hammersley and Traianou (2012).

Therefore, IPA is a dynamic, transparent and iterative methodology, where researchers attempt to understand the participant making-sense of an experience (Smith & Osborn, 2008). The systematic nature of the analysis identifies transparency and detail as core elements of qualitative rigour. Researcher reflexivity illuminates patterns and relationships within the data deriving meaning individually, then as a collective leading to findings which have potential duality in influencing the extension of theory and practice.

***REFLECTION ON STAGE 1 AND THE LINK WITH THE INTENDED THESIS**

My scholarly development is identified in the three key areas of attitude, knowledge and skills.

In terms of attitudinal progress, Paper 1 allowed me to define and describe my paradigmatic assumptions through reflection of my ontological and epistemological notions, encouraging me to develop and assimilate my professional values and standards within my research stance. My interest was directed toward experiences and personalised understanding. This provided a secure platform to survey and subsequently narrowed my field of qualitative enquiry. I have translated and

applied my ethical principles through the inception and construction of my research plan, validating my beliefs about dignity, respect, care, trustworthiness and equality.

I gained subject knowledge through creating and completing Paper 2 (literature review) and Paper 3 (methodology). In Paper 2, I extended my ideas about adult learning theory and debated mechanisms for evaluating distance learning. From Paper 3, I now possess significant comprehension of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, achieving familiarity with the central philosophical underpinnings and securely translating these into tangible plans and actions for my research.

My written work has improved, gaining confidence in style, content, argument building and defence. I have confirmed that I have excellent search and selection skills. My work has a logical flow, is thoroughly supported and substantially detailed. I have also converted existing skills into the research context, for example within my interview technique, use of audio-capture and computer assisted qualitative data analysis (NVivo).

I have discovered that I can take intellectual risk, engaging with complex, philosophically driven methodological ideas. This realization and new found confidence has been personally and professionally fulfilling. I want to progress with Anderson and Braud's (2011) notions of transforming myself and others via the research process. I now see the world through the eyes of an educational researcher, aspiring to be known as a credible phenomenologist.

Research Proposal

The research proposal should not exceed more than 1,000 words (excluding references and those sections marked with an asterisk*). Anything in excess of 1,000 words will not be considered.

Indicative Title: **A Phenomenological Exploration of Adult, Asynchronous Distance Learning.**

Context: This study has stemmed from practice-based observations and conversations. As a distance- learning, academic course lead interest developed through the realisation that whilst there was emphasise to support learners during their course, there was little awareness of actual impact. In other words, whether the course, or particular aspects of the course had actually made a difference to the alumni. These ideas led me to review the evidence-base and I discovered a paucity of this type of enquiry. This lack of evidence seemed at odds with ideas of transformational learning which is viewed as a contemporary conceptualisation for adult learning. Transformational learning is a complex process which is potentially difficult to articulate in the short term, requiring longer term consideration.

Problem Identification: The evidence-base reveals attention toward the mechanisms, processes and functions of distance learning rather than humansitically-orientated outcomes. Here-and-now appraisals of learning and teaching are the primary source for practice progression, policy commitment and funding arrangements (DoE 2011; ARU 2012; QAA 2012). This situation contradicts adult learning theory (Dewey 1938; Knowles, Holton & Swanon 2011; Gilroy 2013) where learning is viewed as an ongoing reappraisal of experience and inherently of the 'self'.

Indeed, current conceptualisations of adult distance learning indicate personal significance and individual growth are valued in the longer-term for self and others (Angelino, Williams & Natvig 2007; Wilson, Parrish & Dunlap 2011; Jarvis 2012; Simpson 2012). Whereas, Ossiannilsson and Landgren (2012) criticise current research attending to actual participation as opposed to future applicability. Consequently, Saunder, Bamber, and Trowler (2011); Borkowsky (2013); Taylor and Cranton (2013) all maintain that evaluation should be based on wider interpretations of experience. My contention is that it is now time to re-think how distance learning is evaluated and understood from a student standpoint.

Research Question: How do distance learning graduates describe their learning experience?

This research question has methodological congruence, reflecting a (phenomenological) description that can be (hermeneutically) interpreted, then (idiographically) compared and contrasted to generate new understandings.

Research Design and Methodology: The research has a 2-stage, ethically driven design; individual telephone, semi-structured interview followed by a face-to-face transcript review, allowing participants to authorise their transcript for analysis and remove verbatim quotes they do not want

used in the final report. Ethical approval has been achieved with all plans and research actions considered within the standards of BERA and the University.

This research design facilitates an exploratory study of personal views, opinions and values requiring a methodology aligned to qualitative approach to investigating the 'lived experience'. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is an approach, process and method; offering a structure to delve deeply into the insights of participants whilst acknowledging and valuing the role of the researcher. IPA's methodological strength is located in the cornerstones of three key philosophical foundations; phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography. This methodology is particularly useful for uncharted questions and where researchers seek to understand subjective change.

Participants: Homogeneous, purposive sampling will enable convergence and divergence within the data to be fully examined. Participants will be two men & two women, aged over 18 who have successfully completed the BSc for more than 1 year prior to interview. They will have been registered professionals for more than five years, have had no previous distance learning experience and will be currently working within a mental health context. This sample size attends to IPA's requirement for deep, rich context-based individualized insights rather than broader, superficial analysis. The sample size attends to ethical need to do justice to the data, cognisant of the error of collecting too much data.

Data Analysis: Data will be systematically analysed using Smith Flowers, Larkin's (2009) 6 stage, flexible process. Beginning with description, and then evolving progressively toward deeper levels of critical analysis for each agreed transcript and finally a collective analysis ascertains commonalities and differences. NVivo is to be used for data management and retrieval. Ongoing, structured field notes will supplement transparency and analysis.

Quality: Yardley's (2008) four principles are embedded throughout this qualitative enquiry. *Sensitivity to context and credibility* is located in the research question and methodological rationale. *Commitment to rigour* is reflected in my audit trail from original proposal to final report, specifically connecting raw data and notes to themes. Reporting verbatim extracts will indicate representativeness and variability, illustrating breadth and depth of each theme elicited. *Transparency and coherence* describes fidelity to IPA, explicitly i) sufficient and balanced sampling from the data ii) concern for meanings contained in the experiential narratives gifted iii) interpretative scrutiny and iv) carefulness relating to generalised assertions. *Impact and importance* will be offered via detailed analysis and reporting, permitting others to evaluate outcomes and decide potential transferability.

Significance: This original area of research will deliver insightful and tangible gains for students, tutors and learning organisations in terms of content and the innovative use of an emerging methodology. There is no doubt that teaching and learning has the potential to transform people's lives, the problem is that our learning community does not seem to be in a position where we fully understand the longer term implications of distance learning for adults and how their learning experiences may have shaped transferable learning. Time has come to take stock of the developments within distance learning and reflect on the actual learning experience and what this means for the alumni. Without this research, a distinct gap remains in the existing evidence-base resulting in limitations for the contemporary and critical evaluation of learning theories, policies and online-practices.

Progression: I am centrally placed within the professional world which I am investigating. I am currently within a descriptive (phenomenological) dilemma and want to understand how I may (hermeneutically) uncover individual and shared (idiographic) insights which may be of benefit to my own and others practice. Therefore, my proposal has both a clear, reasoned and realistic intention combined with a comprehensive plan which can be achieved within the designated time frame.

Appendix C: Research Ethics Application Form (Stage 1)
(accepted 12/04/2014)



More information on ethics procedures and any documents detailed in bold can be found at:
www.anglia.ac.uk/researchethics.

All research carried out by students and staff at Anglia Ruskin University must comply with
Anglia Ruskin University Policy and Code of Practice for the Conduct of Research.

There is no distinction between undergraduate, taught masters, research degree students and staff research.

All research projects, including pilot studies, must receive research ethical approval prior to approaching participants and/or commencing data collection. Completion of this Stage 1 Research Ethics Application Form is mandatory for all research applications*. It should be completed by the Principal Investigator in consultation with any co-researchers on the project, or the student in consultation with his/her research project supervisor.

For research involving animals please complete the **Animal Ethics Review Checklist.*
<http://www.anglia.ac.uk/ruskin/en/home/faculties/fst/research0/ethics.html>

All researchers should:

- Ensure they comply with any laws and associated Codes of Practice that may be applicable to their area of research.
- Ensure their study meets with relevant Professional Codes of Conduct.
- Complete ethics training relevant to their research area.
- Refer to the **Question Specific Advice for the Stage 1 Research Ethics Approval Form**.
- Consult the **Guidelines for Applying for Research Ethics Approval at Anglia Ruskin University**.

If you are still uncertain about the answer to any question please speak to your Dissertation Supervisor/Supervisor, **Faculty Research Ethics Panel (FREP) Chair** or the **Departmental Research Ethics Panel (DREP) Chair**.

Section 1: RESEARCHER AND PROJECT DETAILS

Researcher details:							
Name(s):		Sally Goldspink					
Department:		Education					
Faculty:		Health, Social Care and Education					
Anglia Ruskin email address:		Sally.goldspink@anglia.ac.uk					
Status:							
Undergraduate		Taught Postgraduate		Postgraduate Research	✓	Staff	
If this is a student project:							
SID:		0925492					
Course title:		Educational Doctorate					
Supervisor/tutor name		Dr Phil Long and Dr Geraldine Davis					
Project details:							
Project title (<i>not</i> module title):		A Phenomenological Exploration of Adult, Asynchronous Distance Learning.					
Data collection start date: (<i>note must be prospective</i>)		October 2014					
Expected project completion date:		September 2017					
Is the project externally funded?		No					
Licence number (if applicable):		N/A					
CONFIRMATION STATEMENTS – please tick the box to confirm you understand these requirements							
The project has a direct benefit to society and/or improves knowledge and understanding.						✓	
All researchers involved have completed relevant training in research ethics, and consulted the Guidelines for Applying for Ethical Approval at Anglia Ruskin University.						✓	
The risks participants, colleagues or the researchers may be exposed to have been considered and appropriate steps to reduce any risks identified taken (risk assessment(s) must be completed if applicable, available at: http://rm.anglia.ac.uk/extlogin.asp).						✓	
My research will comply with the Data Protection Act (1998).						✓	
Project summary (maximum 500 words): <i>Please outline rationale for the research, the project aim, the research questions, research procedure and details of the participant population and how they will be recruited.</i>							
<p>Background</p> <p>Widespread adoption of online-learning has necessitated innovation in respect to understanding quality, efficacy and impact. Arguably, this is easier in the short term through achievement of specified learning outcomes and course evaluations, but more challenging when considering impact from a longitudinal perspective. In other words, what have the students actually gained? Many research projects, doctoral studies and books grapple with online education, but there is a paucity of data regarding the personalised impact and longer-term consequences of this mode of learning. This research presents a novel opportunity to examine a specific undergraduate online course and contribute to the existing evidence-base.</p> <p>Aim</p> <p>To retrospectively explore graduate views of an online distance learning course and discover if this experience has current relevance.</p> <p>Provisional research question</p> <p>How do distance learning graduates describe their learning experience?</p> <p>Research procedure</p> <p>The research question necessitates an inductive stance, which will employ Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This approach views individuals as experts who offer an understanding of their thoughts, commitments and feelings by telling their own stories, in as much detail as possible. Therefore, my research design has two layers,</p>							

- 1) An in-depth, semi-structured audiotaped telephone interview with each participant
- 2) Collaborative verification of the transcript with each participant

The semi-structured interview will ask for both a retrospective appraisal of a specific online degree course and also contextually explore current views, tangible application and translation of the learning experience.

A collaborative verification meeting will confirm the data to be used in the final analysis, giving participants the opportunity to inform the researcher of direct quotes they do not wish to be used in the final analysis and writing up stages. This is an important feature of this research methodology as it explicitly offers a more informed consent process for participants and overtly respects their autonomy, choice and privacy.

IPA requires the analysis phase to be systematic and transparent and is informed by a multi-stage strategy (Smith, Flowers and Larkin 2009). NVivo software will support this process. The interpretive process requires the continued development of reflexive awareness as my thoughts and assumptions must be open to challenge during analysis.

Participant Population and Recruitment

Homogeneous, purposive sampling is used to enable convergence and divergence to be fully examined. Therefore, the participant population will be two men & two women, aged over 18 who have successfully completed the BSc for more than 1 year. They will have been registered professionals for more than five years, have had no previous distance learning experience and will be currently working within a mental health context.

Smith, J. A., Larkin, M., & Flowers, P., 2009. *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research*. London: SAGE.

Section 2: RESEARCH ETHICS CHECKLIST: answer YES or NO to ALL of the questions

WILL YOUR RESEARCH STUDY?		YES	NO
1	Involve any external organisation for which separate research ethics clearance is required (e.g. NHS, Social Services, Ministry of Justice)?		No
2	Involve individuals aged 16 years of age and over who lack capacity to consent and will therefore fall under the Mental Capacity Act (2005)?		No
3	Collect, use or store any human tissue/DNA including but not limited to serum, plasma, organs, saliva, urine, hairs and nails?		No
4	Involve medical research with humans, including clinical trials?		No
5	Administer drugs, placebos or other substances (e.g. food substances, vitamins) to human participants?		No
6	Cause (or could cause) pain, physical or psychological harm or negative consequences to human participants?		No
7	Involve the researchers and/or participants in the potential disclosure of any information relating to illegal activities; or observation/handling/storage of material which may be illegal?		No
8	With respect to human participants or stakeholders, involve any deliberate deception, covert data collection or data collection without informed consent?		No
9	Involve children under 18 years of age?		No
10	Relate to military sites, equipment, weapons or the defence industry?		No
11	Involve culturally, spiritually or historically significant artefacts or places, including human remains?		No
12	Involve genetic modification, or use of genetically modified organisms?		No
13	Contain elements you (or members of your team) are not trained to conduct?		No
14	Potentially reveal incidental findings related to human participant health status?		No
15	Present a risk of compromising the anonymity or confidentiality of personal, sensitive or confidential information provided by human participants and/or organisations?		No
16	Involve colleagues, students, employees, business contacts or other individuals whose response may be influenced by your power or relationship with them?	YES	
17	Require the co-operation of a gatekeeper for initial access to the human participants (e.g. pupils/students, self-help groups, nursing home residents, business, charity, museum, government department, international agency)?		No
18	Offer financial or other incentives to human participants?		No
19	Take place outside of the UK, in full or in part?		No
20	Cause a negative impact on the environment (over and above that of normal daily activity)?		No
21	Involve direct and/or indirect contact with human participants?	Yes	
22	Raise any other ethical concerns not covered in this checklist?		No

Section 3: APPROVAL PROCESS

Prior to application:

1. Researcher/student/project tutor completes ethics training. **I completed Epigeum 1 on 30/11/2012 and Epigeum 2 on 05/12/2012. .**
2. Lead researcher/student completes Stage 1 Research Ethics Application form in consultation with co-researchers/project tutor.

NO answered to all questions
(Risk category 1)

Research can proceed.
Send this completed form to your relevant [FREP or DREP](#) for their records.

NO answered to question 1-13
YES answered to any question 14-22 (Risk Category 2)

i) Complete Section 4 of this form.
ii) Produce Participant Information Sheet (PIS) and Participant Consent Form (PCF) if applicable.
iii) Submit this form and PIS/ PCF where applicable to your Faculty [DREP](#) (where available) or Faculty [FREP](#).
Two members of the DREP/FREP will review the application and report to the panel, who will consider whether the ethical risks have been managed appropriately.

- Yes : DREP/FREP inform research team of approval and forward forms to FREP for recording.
- No: DREP/FREP provides feedback to researcher outlining revisions required.

The panel may recommend that the project is upgraded to Category 3: please see below for procedure.
Staff/Postgraduate Students may apply for approval via the 'Fast Track' Ethical Review Process.

Yes answered to question 1 and/or 2
(Risk Category 3)

Submit this completed form to your [FREP](#) to inform them of your intention to apply to an external review panel for your project.
For NHS (NRES) applications, the FREP Chair would normally act as sponsor/co-sponsor for your application.
The outcome notification from the external review panel should be forwarded to FREP for recording.

Yes answered to any question 3-13
(Risk Category 3)

Complete this form and the Stage 2 Research Ethics Application form and submit to your [FREP](#). FREP will review the application and approve the application when they are satisfied that all ethical issues have been dealt with appropriately.

Section 4: ETHICAL RISK (Risk category 2 projects only)**Management of Ethical Risk (Q14-22)**

For each question 14-22 ticked 'yes', please outline how you will manage the ethical risk posed by your study.

16	Involve colleagues, students, employees, business contacts or other individuals whose response may be influenced by your power or relationship with them?	YES	
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Whilst the participants of this study have been students of Anglia Ruskin University, they will no longer have any formal affiliation to the institution or course. Participants will be those who have completed the course for more than one year.

21	Involve direct and/or indirect contact with human participants?	Yes	
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Minimising Harm: Due to the nature of this study, and the narrative quality, participants will be made aware of the interview schedule prior to giving consent and before the interview. The right to withdraw will be explained to include anytime during the data collection phase, however participants will be informed that the right to withdraw will end once they have signed the final, agreed transcript. Support will be offered by the researcher and externally for each participant, should any matters arise which are of concern. Researcher, reflexive awareness is significant in recognising issues of power (and lack of power), protection, respect and safety. This requires me, as the researcher to be reactive, responsive and fully cognisant of my duties of care to ensure these obligations are met. The role of the researcher will be explained at the outset and before each interaction to highlight the differences between researcher and tutor.

Respecting Autonomy: Assurances regarding data storage will be that personal information will be held on a password managed, Anglia Ruskin University file and will be encoded. Transcripts will be fully anonymised and will only be used for the purpose of this research, by the researcher and supervisor. The difference between anonymity and confidentiality will be explained and will be part of the consent process. The decision to participate is that of the participant unless the researcher has evidence that participation in the research has become or has the potential to become harmful to the individual. If this should occur, discussion will take place between the participant, researcher and supervisor unless delay in reporting to a third party would significantly endanger health or life.

Protecting Privacy: Discussions and agreements about what will be made public will be highlighted at each phase. In the pre-research phase, participants will have information that (anonymised) verbatim reports will be included within the final report. This will also be reiterated and negotiated at the second meeting when participants have the opportunity to remove any direct quotes that they do not wish to be used in the final analysis and write up. The location and environment of the interview will be negotiated with each individual participant and will be assessed for privacy, accessibility and personal comfort.

Offering Reciprocity and Beneficence: This research depends upon access to data. Participants will give their personal time to be interviewed, so clear time frames will be given. The purpose and process of the research will be clarified with the participant at each phase to keep participants informed and integrated in the generation of new knowledge. It is intended that participation will offer the participants a guided opportunity to reflect on their learning achievements and gain a deeper and helpful insight into their own situations that can be used for the good of the individual and others they encounter in their personal and professional lives. The opportunity to read the transcript prior to the analysis phase is intended to strengthen the reflective opportunity for the participant.

Treating People Equitably: Participants will be given the same information, opportunity for time and support irrespective of data shared or choice to withdraw. This is a personally-orientated study and participants must expect that are treated equally, in the sense that no-one is unjustly favoured or discriminated against.

Section 5: Declaration**Declaration and Signatures**

I confirm that I will undertake this project as detailed above. I understand that I must abide by the terms of this approval and that I may not substantially amend the project without further approval.

Signature (lead researcher):		Date:	16.03.14
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13 August, 2013

Version: V11.0

Appendix D: Participant Information

i) Initial email to potential participants

Dear,

My name is Sally Goldspink and I am an Educational Doctorate student at Anglia Ruskin University and I was the course lead for the BSc (Hons) which you recently completed. I am recruiting for my research study and would like to invite you to participate.

I am currently investigating the experience of completing an online degree. For my study I am looking to recruit people who have graduated from the course over a year ago and who qualified as a registered professional more than 5 years ago.

I am hoping that my research may help me to understand and progress online education for working, adult learners.

As a participant, you would be asked to take part in a two-stage process. Firstly one audio-recorded telephone interview lasting around 1-1½ hours which will involve you talking to me about your experience on the course and the consequences of your learning and degree completion. At a second meeting, we will read the transcript of the interview together and this will give you the opportunity see what we have produced and remove any direct quotes that you do not wish me to use within the final report. It is intended that this second meeting will last for 1-1 ½ hours.

We can meet in the most comfortable and convenient setting for you. For the telephone interview, access to a land line is needed. Our conversation will be recorded so you will need somewhere where there will be minimal distraction and background noise. Once the transcripts are typed, I will arrange to come and see you for the second meeting.

If you find any part of our conversation or any of the questions difficult, you do not have to answer. It is entirely your choice as to whether you decide to participate or not. If you do take part, you will be free to withdraw up until the data analysis phase of the research without giving a reason. You are welcome to ask any further questions before this decision is made and you will be offered additional information.

Any information collected during the research will be anonymised before use. Identifying information is to be retained securely and independently from the audio-recording and following data analysis. No one except me (Sally Goldspink) will be able to access information which could identify you. My current project supervisor Dr Phil Long (contact details below) and associated doctoral supervisors will have access to the raw data (anonymised transcripts) but not your details. Confidentiality may only be breached if any information is disclosed during the interview which leads to sufficient concern regarding the safety of an individual or others. In this situation I would contact my project supervisor, Dr Phil Long to raise my concerns, however if there is significant and immediate risk to health or life then I would need to act immediately.

Please contact me via the email address below or by telephone 0845 196 **5507** to let me know if you would consider participating, or if you require further information about my research study.

Thank you, your time is very much appreciated.

Kind Regards,

0925492

Sally Goldspink

Course Lead

Anglia Ruskin University

Sally.goldspink@anglia.ac.uk

Education Doctorate Supervisor

Dr Phil Long

Anglia Ruskin University

0845 196 **3557**

phil.long@anglia.ac.uk

Appendix E: Participant Information Pack

Study title: A Phenomenological Exploration of Asynchronous, Adult Distance Learning.

Dear,

I am inviting you to take part in my research study. Prior to making a decision, I need to inform you why the research is being conducted and how this would involve you.

Please let me know if there is anything you need clarification about, or if you require additional information. It is important that you feel fully informed, so please take your time to decide whether you would like to participate or not.

What is the intention of the study?

My name is Sally Goldspink and I am in my 2nd year of an Educational Doctorate course at Anglia Ruskin University. I am conducting this research for my final Doctoral research study.

I am currently investigating the experience of completing an online degree. For my study, I require two men and two women, aged over 18 who have successfully completed the BSc (Hons) at least one year before the interview takes place. They will need to have been registered professionals for more than five years, have had no previous distance learning experience and who are currently working within a mental health context.

I am hoping my research may help to both understand and progress online education for working, adult learners.

Why have you been invited to participate?

You have met the inclusion criteria and have expressed an interest in my study.

Do you have to take part?

It is wholly your choice about whether to participate or not. If you choose to participate, a copy of this information sheet will be provided for you to keep. I will also ask you to complete and sign an initial consent form which will indicate your agreement to participate and a second form which will give me permission to analyse and use the data generated. Please be assured that you are entirely free to withdraw before the data analysis stage without giving a reason.

What will happen if I take part?

If you agree to take part, you would be asked to take part in a two-stage process. Firstly one telephone (audio-recorded) meeting lasting around 1-1½ hours and will involve you talking to me about your experience on the course and the consequences of your learning and degree completion. At a second meeting we will read the written transcript together and you will be able to remove any direct quotes that you do not want me to use in my final report, again this should take about 1-1 ½ hours. I will also ask you at this stage to sign the transcript and give me consent to use it for analysis.

Are there possible disadvantages of participating?

There are few identified disadvantages of taking part. It is acknowledged that health and social care professionals are busy people and it may be hard to find the time to meet. I am happy to meet at a venue that is most convenient and comfortable to you and that would minimise the time requirement in terms of travel on your part.

What are the possible benefits of participating?

This research study will offer you time and space to consider and reflect on your own learning experience. In particular we will have time together reading our transcript and this may enhance the opportunity for your own personal reflection. Potentially this research may help other educationalists to make sense of, and understand the experience of distance learning so that we can progress our work with future online learners such as you.

What happens if I have a concern about the study?

Should any part of this study cause you concern, please speak to me and I will try my very best to address your comments and answer any questions (Telephone number: 0845 196 5507, email sally.goldspink@anglia.ac.uk). If you wish to complain formally you can do this by contacting my research supervisor, Dr Phil Long (Tel: 0845 196 3557 email phil.long@anglia.ac.uk).

How will my participation be kept confidential?

Any information collected about you will be anonymised and will be securely and separately stored away from your audio-recording and the following data-analysis. No one else will have access to information that could identify you. No one except me (Sally Goldspink) will have the right to use to information which could identify you. My research supervisors will have access to the raw data (anonymised transcripts) but not your details.

Due to the need for accuracy in terms of transcription, an approved transcription service will be used to transcribe your interview. In this case your recording will be labelled A, B, C etc. to protect identity. The service has a policy for maintaining confidentiality. The anonymised transcripts will also be reviewed by my research supervisors, all of whom are authorised and employed by Anglia Ruskin University. Anonymised parts of the data gathered may also be reviewed by academic examiners in order to determine the quality of my doctoral research study. All those involved in this process have duty of confidentiality to you.

All audio-recordings and identifiable information about your participation will be held until my research degree has been fully completed. After this, all interview audio- recordings will be destroyed.

What are the reasons for confidentiality to be breached?

As all participants will be regulated by the Nursing Midwifery Council (NMC) or Health Care Professions Council (HCPC) and due to your professional status your professional codes of conduct will be followed with regards confidentiality:

This will include;

1. If you provide information which leads to a serious concern about your own or others safety, an appropriate third party(s) may be informed in the absence of formal consent.
2. Before this was to happen, I would contact my research supervisor to inform him of my concerns, except in the situation where delay would result in a substantial risk to life or well-being.

What are the possible outcomes of this research?

My results are to be written up in the form of a thesis for the purposes of gaining an Educational Doctorate (EdD) qualification. It is anticipated that my findings may be disseminated to the academic community via academic publications, presentations, reports and teaching. You will not be directly identified in any aspect of sharing my findings with others. All direct quotes are to be fully anonymised. You do have the opportunity when we meet to decline any part of your transcript to be used when we meet to read the transcript.

Who will review this study?

Research conducted within our University is reviewed by the Research Ethics Committee to ensure we protect your rights, dignity safety and well-being. My study has undergone review and been agreed on ethical grounds.

Additional information and contact details.

Once you have read this information sheet, please email sally.goldspink@anglia.ac.uk and let me know if;

- 1. You are not interested in participating in this project.*
- 2. You may be interested in participating in this project but would like further information, please provide telephone number and let me know most convenient time to call.*
- 3. You are interested in participating in this project and agree to me contacting you, please provide telephone number and let me know the most convenient time to call.*

Once we have established your agreement to participate, we can negotiate when our telephone interview can take place.

Appendix F: Consent form

Project Title: A Phenomenological Exploration of Asynchronous, Adult Distance Learning.

Name of Researcher: Sally Goldspink, Educational Doctorate student.

Name of Supervisor: Dr Phil Long.

To be completed by participant.	Sign	Date
1. I have read and understood the information sheet for this study.		
2. I understand that I am free to decline entry into the study and that I can leave the study without giving a reason at any time.		
3. I agree to take part in the above study and for the interview to be audio recorded.		
4. I understand that anonymised sections of the data collected will be reviewed by authorised persons from Anglia Ruskin University. All have a duty of confidentiality to research participants.		
5. I agree to be contacted for my comments on the findings of the study. I am aware I can decline my involvement at any time.		
6. I give permission for my anonymised quotes to be analysed within the construction of an Educational Doctorate, plus used in future publications and for teaching purposes.		

Participant.

Name:

Signature:

Date:

Person taking consent.

Name:

Signature:

Date:

Appendix G: Participant Screening

STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL

All participants will be asked the following questions to screen for inclusion and exclusion criteria of the study.

Was verbal consent obtained from the potential participant before asking the questions below?
Yes/No

1. Is the participant a qualified health or social care professional?
2. Has the participant been professionally registered for more than 5 years?
3. Has the participant graduated from the BSc (Hons) for more than 1 year?
4. Do they feel comfortable discussing their personal learning experience?
5. Male/Female

Appendix H: Pre-Interview Briefing

1) Aims of investigation:

- *To retrospectively explore graduate views of an online distance learning course and discover if this experience has current relevance”.*
- *To ensure personal experience is heard.*
- *Long term goal: to disseminate information about the experience of online learning to the educational community.*

2) Procedure of interview (stage 1):

- Interview will last for approximately one hour.
- The interview will be tape-recorded.
- All participants will be asked similar questions during the interview.
- The questions will act as a guide for the interview.
- The aim is to hear your experience.

Procedure of interview (stage 2):

- You will receive a copy of our transcript before we meet for you to read.
- At our meeting we will talk through the transcript and you will be offered the opportunity to identify any direct quotes that you do not want to be used in the final write up or possible subsequent publications.
- We will make our notes directly onto one master transcript.
- I will ask for your copy back and this will be destroyed.
- You will be asked to sign the master copy and sign an agreement that this can be used for analysis.

3) During the interview (stages 1 and 2):

- If at any time you wish to stop the interview you may do so without giving a reason.
- You are in no way obliged to answer the questions provided by the researcher.

4) Confidentiality:

- Your participation in this project will remain confidential within the limits defined in Appendix 2 of the Participant Information Pack
- Your personal details will only be known by the researcher.
- Your personal details and tape recordings will be separated and held in a secure filing cabinet at the researchers' premises. All data will be encoded and password protected
- If you disclose information during the interview which leads to sufficient concern regarding your own or others safety, it may be necessary to notify a relevant third party without formal consent. If appropriate, before this occurred, the researcher would inform the project supervisor to discuss the concern, unless a delay would result in a significant risk to health, well-being or life.

5) Provision after interview:

- Following the interview you will be given further opportunities to ask questions regarding the project and any concerns you may have. If the researcher is unable to provide you with the correct answers for your questions she will endeavour to provide you with appropriate source of professional advice.
- You will be provided with a list of support services you may be interested in contacting if you feel you may wish to talk about your experience further.

6) Questions

- You are free to ask the researcher or the research supervisor any further questions you may have about this research study.

Appendix I: Debriefing Schedule

1. Recap on purpose of study:

- *“To retrospectively explore graduate views of an online distance learning course and discover if this experience has current relevance”.*
- *To ensure personal experience is heard.*
- *Long term goal: to disseminate information about the experience of online learning to the educational community.*

2. Review of interview:

- You will be asked how you found the interview.
- You will be asked if you would have preferred anything to be done differently.
- You will be asked if there are any recommendations for the researcher to aid improvement of the investigation.

3. Unresolved issues:

- The researcher will ask you if you feel that any issues have been raised during the interview which may have concerned you.
- It is the researcher's duty to ensure any questions you ask are answered sufficiently. This may involve directing you towards the correct professional resources.

4. Future concerns and contact with researcher:

- If you have any concerns or further questions about this research please do not hesitate to contact myself or my project supervisor.
- My supervisor and I will be available for contact up to six months after participation for any issues relating to the research project.

Appendix J: Interview schedule

This study has a phenomenological focus and therefore the interview schedule will aim to gather in-depth, detailed information about the participants lived experience of completing a distance learning undergraduate degree. A semi-structured interview strategy will be used as a guide to promote ‘a conversation with a purpose’ (Burgess 1984: 102).

Core questions will be deliberately open-ended and will be followed up with probing, supplementary questions to seek greater detail to the description (Roulston 2013).

	Format for Core Questions	Purpose
1	Tell me about what is happening with you since completing the course.	Context building
2	Looking back, how would you describe the course?	Experience definition
3	Talk me through your experience of the course from start to finish, in as much detail as you can.	Reflection
4	From what you have just told me, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What are your main recollections? - What were the most positive features? - What were the key challenges? - Was the course what you expected? 	Establishing specific descriptive detail
5	Thinking about home and work, how would you describe the impact of your participation and achievement? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Are there any specific examples you could tell me about? - At what point did you notice these changes? - Have other people commented – what has been said? 	Consequence of experience
6	In what ways do you think completing this course will help you in the future?	Descriptive impact
7	Is there anything that we have missed in our conversation that you think it is important to tell me about?	Experience checking

Examples of supplementary questions.

- You mentioned _____, tell me what that was like for you.
- Can you give me an example of _____.
- You said _____, walk me through what that was like for you.
- You mentioned _____, describe that in more detail for me.
- How was _____ different for you?