Students' Perceptions of an Online B.E.D. Program

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Abstract
This qualitative exploratory study of four online Caribbean students' perceptions offers some insights into the challenges and benefits of the online learning environment. The face of education continues to be confronted with the exponential growth of technology. With such issues as learner-learner and learner-instructor interactions, this paper links the theoretical frameworks of interactions to andragogy in the online learning environment. Students discussed issues of concerns such as technological failures and workload challenges but were quick to point out the benefits of the online learning experiences of convenience, relevance, and caring, helpful and resourceful tutors. With limited research in the Caribbean, the findings herein extend the extant literature.
Keywords: andragogy and online earning; interactions in online learning; Caribbean online learning

1. Introduction
Technology has altered the traditional brick and mortar educational institution where with the click of a mouse and the stroke of a key, students are able to learn, interface, integrate, and communicate. Online learning has transcended geographic boundaries allowing students everywhere who can afford a tertiary education, the convenience of learning via the Internet. The Caribbean is no exception with online learning being implemented in 2008. The current website for the online learning programs states that there are over 20,000 students enrolled in programs across the Caribbean as of April 19, 2014. With so many small islands, limited universities and access to tertiary education, online learning is proving quite beneficial to teachers where there is minimal access to Bachelor of Education degree programs in the traditional setting.

2. Problem
Frankola (2001) and Worely (2000) accentuated the high attrition rate among online learners which Williams, Duray, and Reddy (2006) termed "as e-learning most embarrassing secret" (p. 596). Worely reported a drop out rate of 10% to 50% and 10% to 20% in online learning as opposed to face-to-face instruction which is similar to Jordan's (2009) findings where she suggested that isolation and lack of immediacy of responses from tutors were issues surrounding low retention rates in online and distance learning environments.
In her narrative review of 10 peer-reviewed journals Bissessar (20011) concluded that the interaction aspect of online learning is needed in order to ensure that students do not feel alienated. Using her previous e-tutoring experience in the online learning environment, Bissessar found problems of high attrition rates among her students and feelings of isolation. Bissessar stated that: "(a) there is a need for increased emphasis on collaboration and (b) above all e-tutors should show concern, support, caring, and give feedback as soon as is possible to remove any feelings of isolation" (p. 10). The problem continues to be student isolation and high attrition rates within the online learning environment.
This study is significant in that it adds to the limited body of information on online learning in the Caribbean especially in the Eastern Caribbean countries. It also expands the theoretical frameworks of interaction and andragogy in the online learning environment to the Caribbean region. Moreover, the study includes participants' use of such recently nascent technology as SKYPE, WhatsApp, and Facebook as a means of decreasing isolation and increasing motivation among online learners.

3. Purpose
The purpose of this qualitative exploratory study couched in the interpretist paradigm was to determine students' perceptions of an online Bachelor of Education program. The following research questions were answered: (a) How have the interactions between peers and e-tutors been? (b) What features of the online learning environment assisted students in the learning process? (c) How has their experience been with the online learning environment?

4. Literature/Theory
4.1 Interaction in the Online Learning Environment
Interaction is part of the socialization process within the online learning environment (Thurmond & Wambach, 2004; Irwin & Berge, 2006). Thurmond and Wambach stated that interaction is critical within the online learning environment since it encompasses: "encouraging faculty/students contact; developing reciprocity and cooperation; engaging in active learning; providing quick feedback; emphasizing the amount of time dedicated

to a task; communicating high expectations; and respecting diversity" (p.1). Thurmond's (2003) definition of interaction takes into consideration all these dimensions and involves:

> The learner's engagement with the course content, other learners, the instructor, and the technological medium used in the course. True interactions with other learners, the instructor, and the technology results in a reciprocal exchange of information. The exchange of information is intended to enhance knowledge development in the learning environment. Depending on the nature of the course content, the reciprocal exchange may be absent – such as in the case of paper printed content. Ultimately, the goal of interaction is to increase understanding of the course content or mastery of the defined goals. (p. 4)

With interaction encompassing so many elements, it is important to note that researchers have differentiated between interaction and interactivity. Interactivity, according to Thurmond and Wambach (2004) described the technology used whilst interaction focuses on "behaviors of individuals or groups" (p. 2). For the purpose of this paper, interaction will be used according to Thurmond's (2003) definition. Of the four types of interactions noted in the online learning environment, this paper encompasses only learner-learner and learner-instructor interactions.

4.1a Learner-Learner Interaction

Thurmond and Wambach (2004) discussed learner-learner interaction as taking place between one learner and another learner or one learner and several learners. Thurmond advanced that in order for learner-learner interaction to take place, four types of "peer behavior are necessary in a computer mediated environment: (a) participation, (b) response, (c) provision of affective feedback, and (d) short, focused messaging" (p. 2). Proponents of learner-learner interaction underscored the value of such interaction in the online learning environment (Soo & Bonk, 1998; Muirhead, 2005; Sahin, 2007). Moreover, studies conducted by Fredericksen et al. (2000) suggested that students who experienced increased levels of interactions with their peers online also stated that they learned more. Instructors in the online system have also reported positive findings of learner-learner interaction (Soo & Bonk, 1998; Muirhead, 2005; Sahin, 2007). Collaborative group learning can also be valuable and alleviate that feeling of isolation (Thurmond & Wambach, 2004; Blondy, 2007; Bissessar, 2011).

4.1 b Learner-Instructor Interaction

The role of learner-instructor interaction in the online learning environment is pivotal in determining whether students remain in the classroom or not. Bissessar's (2011) narrative review of 10 peer-reviewed journals pertaining to students' feelings of isolation underscored the need for more caring, supportive, and concerned instructors. Learner-instructor interaction, according to Thurmond and Wambach (2004) is linked to face-to-face interactions, timely feedback, course performance, and instructor presence.

For the purposes of this paper, face-to-face interactions do not occur. Timely feedback within the online environment is critical to student satisfaction and in deterring feelings of isolation (Lee & Chan, 2007; Bissessar, 2011). Thurmond and Wambach (2004) stated that three main reasons dictate that timely feedback is important in the online learning environment. The first is the quality of feedback to individual learners since face-to-face meetings do not occur and the issue of geographic location can also suggest the need for immediacy of feedback

Online presence according to Irwin and Berge (2006) is also vital in ensuring continued positive interaction between learner and instructor. Shin (2002) viewed social presence as that "feeling of intimacy or togetherness in terms of sharing time and place" (p. 122). The dearth of face-to-face meetings make instructor presence in the online learning environment an essential part of online student engagement. Adult students as self-directed learners determine the level of motivation in the classroom.

4.2 Andragogy

Several theorists purported that andragogy is self-directed learning where teaching is learner-focused and learners learn what they need to know. Thus, learning in the andragogical model is based on real-life application of the information and entails problem-solving. Part of adult learning is recognizing and using experiences as bedrocks on which to construct new knowledge. Knowles' (1984) theory of andragogy makes the following assumptions: (a) the adult learner is self-directed; (b) adults need to know why they have to learn something; (c) adults need to learn experientially; (d) adults learn best when they see the immediate value of what they are learning; and (e) adults approach learning as problem solving.

Congruently, proponents of adult learning indicated that adults are called upon to: (a) know the relevancy of why they are learning new information; (b) be self-directed and autonomous; (c) make and have connections between new learning and previous life experiences; and (d) be goal-oriented, task-centered, and problem solvers (Caffarella & Barnett, 1994; Hacker & Harris, 1998; Hiemstra, 1993; & Knowles, 1970). Similarly, Vella (2008) espoused 12 principles for effective adult learning. Out of those 12 principles, the most notable are: (a) needs assessment: participation of the learners in deciding what is to be learned; (b) sound relationship between teacher/student; and (c) praxis: involves action with reflection, acquiring knowledge, practising new skills and attitudes and then reflecting on what was accomplished.

4.3 Andragogy and the Online Learning Environment

Blondy (2007) in her analysis of andragogy and online learning, examined each of the five assumptions of anadragogy and determined the implications for online learning. The first assumption that adult learners are self-directed is linked to the online learning environment where learners are expected to set their own goals and activities to ensure that the course objectives are successfully attained (Hanna et al., 2000). Blondy also indicated that collaboration among online users was necessary for learning to become more self-directed. In addition to being collaborative and ensuring an atmosphere of risk-taking, there is also a need for guidance to be given to learners when they need clarification on completion of assignments.

 Quality feedback within the online learning environment is critical to the self-directed student. Song et al. (2004) found immediacy of response as critical to ensuring that online learners do not feel isolated. Communication with peers and e-tutors is required if online learners are to practice self-directed learning (Blondy, 2007; Bissessar, 2011).

According to Muilenburg and Berge (2005), "the strongest association found in their study was between online learning enjoyment and social interaction, administrative/instructor issues and learner motivation and online learning enjoyment had a small effect with time and support for online learning" (p. 43). Albeit, self-directed learners, there is still a strong need for communication within the online learning environment.

The second assumption of andragogy is that, adults bring experiences with them to the online learning environment. In order to tap into online students' experiences, there is a need to create opportunities for students to share their experiences. Activities should cater to these experiences. Salmon (2002) viewed this as stages three and four of his theory for improved practice. Stage 3 entails information sharing and stage four focuses on knowledge construction where online activities are centred on personal and professional reflection and relevance. Authentic learning takes place where students integrate theories and concepts and combine information to construct realities.

The third assumption of andragogy is that adults enter the learning environment ready to learn. Adults learn out of necessity and this learning should be fun and enjoyable. Within the online environment, facilitators should be cognizant that online learners are motivated to be there due to their willingness or desire to educate themselves. Discussion on the reason for being there and the relevance of the material will be in direct correlation to the needs of the online learners.

The fourth assumption is that adult learners are problem-oriented. Adult learners need to apply what they have learned to their lived experience. They do not learn for the sake of learning. Herrington, Oliver, and Reeves (2003) posited 10 characteristics of authentic activities worthy of implementation within the online environment. Several of these relate to being more problem-oriented. For example, they suggested that activities should have real world relevance, should be complex, should provide opportunities for reflection and collaboration, and should be open to multiple interpretations.

The fifth assumption is that adults are internally motivated to learn by such factors as praise, self-esteem, and recognition. Within the online learning environment, facilitators need to understand this and according to Collison et al. (2000) to encourage relevant online work and interaction by: "(a) leading introductory, community-building activities; (b) providing virtual 'hand holding' to the digitally challenged; (c) acknowledging the diversity of participants' backgrounds and interests; (d) infusing personality with tone, graphics and humour; and (e) maintaining a nurturing pace of responding (p. 49). Carr (2000) and Jung et al. (2002) in their research found that student satisfaction and course design and the amount of tutor-student interaction, and student-student interaction were interrelated. Blondy (2007) suggested that facilitators recognize each student for his/her contribution once a week as a means of satisfying students' internal motivation.

5.1 Method

A small-scale exploratory study was used to determine students' perception of an online B.Ed. program. Convenience sampling was used to interview four female students completing their dissertation and supervised by the researcher. Three of the four students taught in Grenada and one taught in Dominica. Participants' ages ranged from 33 to 49 with teaching experiences from nine to 26 years. All students gave informed consent to have their interviews used in the study and findings reported cumulatively. Students were asked demographic information such as age, position in the school, number of years teaching and other questions pertaining to their experiences in the online learning environment. Four out of five female students responded to questions via Skype from the 27th March 2014 to April 1st, 2014. These interviews were collected, analyzed and re-examined several times throughout the coding process to ensure credibility and reliability of the conclusions.

5.2 Findings

Based on the codification process the aforementioned themes were found and cross-referenced. During the process of inquiry, the researcher checked the data for trustworthiness "credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability" (Lincoln & Guba 1985, p. 189). From the data garnered, there was the repetition of key descriptive words and phrases such as: "resourceful," "transformational" "transformative," "relevant,"

"applicable," "motivating," "interactive," "timely and concise feedback," "caring," "convenient," "useful," "understanding," "support base," and "collaboration," which when analyzed quantitatively proved to be 80% of words participants used during the interviews.

Initial coding based on content analysis indicated the preponderance of similar themes under two broad components: (a) interaction and andragogy in the online learning environment and (b) resources. The first aspect, interactions among e-tutors, coordinators, and peers, as well as the underlying theme of andragogy in the online learning will be discussed. The second category was that of resources and in this area there was technology, material (encompassing courses), and student support.

5.2 a Learner-Learner Interaction

One of the prominent issues discussed was that of learner-learner interactions. All four participants indicated that they had connected with their peers outside of the newsroom in their specific course. Participant B stated that she had made "lots of contacts all over the Caribbean from 2010 to present. The relationships were maintained. Persons link up to discuss assignments and project. Personal matters and issues are also discussed as moral support is given to others. We encourage each other" (personal communication, March 27th, 2014). Participant C also indicated:

> We have formed study groups on Skype, added personal emails, WhatsApp, BBM, Viber, Tango, Facebook and text. We meet socially or meet to discuss assignments it has also helped us to know each other personally by celebrating birthdays, anniversaries and other achievements.   (Personal communication, March 29th, 2014)

Participant D, in a similar vein, stated, "the interactions with colleagues from across the region broaden my perspective on different matters: personally and professionally." (Personal communication, April 1st, 2014). Congruently, participant A stated:

I have formed connections with the other students. Though we lived far apart it sometimes seem like we're face to face. I have experienced mutual support, collegiality and camaraderie. We push and motivate each other. We clarify doubts and share experiences. I have learnt that collaboration can be quite beneficial to my learning. (Personal communication, March 27th, 2014)

Participant A did admit though that the group activities posed a problem since there were loafers" (personal communication March 27th, 2014).

Bissessar (2011) found that collaboration among online students, according to researchers, resulted in more satisfied students and decreased feelings of isolation. Collaboration is a main staple of the online learning environment which all participants stated in their responses to questions. Blondy (2007) in her discussion on the first assumption of andragogy stated that collaboration is effective in a self-directed learning environment. The use of technology outside the online classroom environment to stay in contact, to provide support as a sounding board for each other, to celebrate achievements and significant dates as well as clarify information on the actual courses illustrates that learner-learner interactions have transcended the stereotypical classroom. The need to be recognized and praised relates to the fifth assumption about andragogy where adult students crave the need to be praised since they are intrinsically motivated.

A paradigm shift is taking place in online interactions as advances in technology make it easier for people to connect beyond physical and geographical boundaries and discuss shared, lived experiences. Bissessar (20014) in her study of a Trinidadian teachers' Facebook site found similar occurrences among its members where teachers "were able to socialize, vent, give and receive advice, share a kinship that surpassed geography, ethnicity and any hierarchical structures" (p. 133). Technological advances are making it more convenient for learners to connect and have fruitful learner-learner and learner-instructor interactions.

5.2 b Learner-Instructor Interactions

All participants were satisfied with their learner-instructor interactions. Participant A stated, "Course Coordinators and e-tutors, for the most part, have been resourceful and interactive" (personal communication, March 27th, 2014). She further described her e-tutors as, "Sacrificial, motivating, extremely competent in the particular discipline, provided timely and concise feedback (Most times)." Notice the importance given to timely feedback which was underscored by several researchers as crucial in the online learning environment (Blondy, 2007; Lee & Chan, 2007; Bissessar, 2011).

Participant B stated, "E-tutors are very helpful. They want their students to succeed. They treat students with respect. They show interest and make time for students in the completing of assignments" (personal communication, March 27th, 2014). Participant C continued in a similar vein, "Most of my tutors are very knowledgeable and supportive some go above and beyond their call of duty to ensure that we succeed" and she described them as, "caring and resourceful coordinators." She also gave an example of one e-tutor going above and beyond:

> I have a tutor who has all my means of communication and he links up with me to ensure that I stay on the ball. I am able to Skype, WhatsApp or text him whenever I am in need. I even get personal counseling when needs be. (Personal communication, March 29th, 2014)

Participant D indicated, "the e-tutors that I have interacted with on Skype, I did find helpful and most responded in a timely fashion. The interaction made the distance a non- issue." She continued:

> The few e-tutors that I have had the pleasure of interacting with, I found helpful, motivating and genuine. For example, one tutor has been, via WhatsApp, sending me motivational quotes every morning and when I was having difficulties called me long distance to give clarification on a certain area. (Personal communication, April 1st, 2014)

Based on these comments, it is evident that these online students are internally motivated and are quite pleased that they have been singled out for special consideration and praise in order to cater to their intrinsic motivation which is the fifth assumption of adult learning. Bissessar (2011) found that online students stated that "above all e-tutors should show concern, support, caring, and give feedback as soon as is possible to remove any feelings of isolation" (p. 1).

5.2 c Andragogy and the Online Learning Classroom

As mentioned in the literature review, there are five assumptions about adult students and learning. Connections to the first and fifth were made in the aforementioned paragraphs. The discussion will continue on the other assumptions of adult learning. Three participants noted that this online learning program has positively affected them. Participant A stated, "It promotes self-learning." She continued, "My experience with the B.Ed. program has been excellent. I have been able to maintain a very good GPA. I have been totally transformed and I feel confident as a leader." Participant B indicated, "Very challenging but gives one a sense of achievement. Very transformative. Gain new insights into different subject matter." These two responses suggest that participants' are self-directed, eager to learn, like a challenge, and are intrinsically motivated which are assumptions made about the adult learner. Participant C stated:

> The first year was a learning one having to adjust to a new mode of learning and presentation. Time was critical having to juggle between work and studies and family however, it had to be managed well to be efficient. So far it has been very rewarding and I am able to maintain a GPA of 3+. (Personal communication, March 29th, 2014)

Participant D stated:

> Thus far, it has been a challenge, a trying experience to say the least that has taught me alot about myself. However, it is not a method of learning that I would again participate in. I felt that the course structure was not suitable for working professionals. (Personal communication, April 1st, 2014)

In these examples, three out of the four students were quite willing to accept the "challenge" and work toward increased efficiency.

5.2 d Resources

Resources will be discussed below based on students' responses to questions about technology, the courses, structure, material, and student support services. Participant A stated, "The resources are readily available."

5.2 e Technology

As with everything else, there were positive and negative responses regarding technology. Participant A stated, when referring to the Blackboard Illuminate sessions:

> Generally, the sessions were very good and quite interactive. The audio and written access gave everyone the opportunity to participate. Also, the recordings were quite useful since some persons have genuine reasons for not being able to attend the live meeting.

When discussing the use of technology in presenting her practicum experience, Participant A stated, "The individual presentations were extremely useful. It boosted my confidence and gave me the opportunity to learn from my colleagues." She was able to cater to her self-directed learning ability part of the assumption of adult learning. Additionally, Participant A described the e-tutors' presentations as, "it was extremely helpful. It added clarity to content as well as assignments." She described the use of technology for online learning as, "Excellent except when technology failed." Participant A also indicated that some e-tutors were not competent in the use of technology especially Blackboard Illuminate.

In describing the use of Blackboard Illuminate to conduct group meetings, Participant C stated, "The meetings for the greater part have been well organized and timely they serve to enhance the concepts presented in the units and give a human touch to the course. There have been some challenges with internet connections." Participant B also found her online presentations beneficial, "they helped with additional study skills, research and understanding of concepts." She also found the Skype interactions with her e-tutors profitable. She stated:

> My Skype interactions with the tutors have been minimal however when they do occur they are very beneficial because of the personal touch it brings and they also serve to bring clarity to doubts. Internet connection is a challenge sometimes.

Participant D agreed with the other respondents that the Blackboard Illuminate sessions "were useful and give clarifications to an extent." Overall, participants indicated that the technology helped erase the distance factor and build friendships as well as create a relationship between learner and tutor. The only drawback was the efficiency of the technology, Participant A stated, "Internet connectivity was sometimes challenging."

5.2 f Courses

Participant A stated, "Most of the courses are very relevant to my job." She also indicated that, "It prepares individuals for different positions within education." Participant C opined that she would recommend this program and online learning to other potential students because, "It is affordable, flexible-you can study while working; ease of study, resourcefulness, relevance of the courses offered and good supportive tutors." However, Participant D stated:

> I would not recommend this mode of learning to anyone unless they have the time to be fully vested in it. The University must reconsider the approach to developing courses for online programs particularly because the majority of students are working professionals.

This sentiment was not one expressed by the other participants and was the exception rather than the rule. Participant A demonstrated the very epitome of adult learning in the online learning environment when asked whether she would recommend this program to other students. She stated: "I will definitely recommend online learning to my peers. It is convenient for full-time workers and persons with families, gives flexibility in study hours, can be self-paced and help is provided when needed."

5.2 g Structure/Material/Student Support

Participant D stated," the course structure was not suitable for working professionals, too demanding particularly given that I was doing more than two courses per semester." Participant C also indicated that she found, "Too many assignments at close intervals" and "assignments did not match grade weighting." Participant A had the opposite experience, she stated, "This B.Ed. program took too long for completion. I think we started off much too slowly. During level one, we could have been given more courses per semester."

5.2 h Material

Participant A stated, "In a few instances, the course material had to be re-organized in the midst of the semester." Participant A also opined that the link to the online library created some problems, "the link was not always efficient and many persons did not know how to use it."

5.2 I Student Support

Participant A on student support lauded the efforts and indicated, "the student support staff is doing a wonderful job at present....the only thing is that they waited until we are finishing up to make their presence felt."

6. Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory study was to determine students' perceptions of an online Bachelor of Education program. The following research questions were answered: (a) How have the interactions between peers and e-tutors been? (b) What features of the online learning environment assisted students in the learning process? (c) How has their experience been with the online learning environment? Based on the data collected, the four participants thought that interactions with each other and their e-tutors were critical to their online learning experience. They also stated that the Blackboard Illuminate sessions and other technologies such as Skype, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Viber helped in creating an atmosphere of care and concern. The five assumptions of adult learning espoused by Knowles (1984) were linked to their responses where they exemplified features of self-directed learning in their responses to recommending online learning to potential students. The relevance of the material indicated that they used their personal and professional experiences to internalize the material. They stated that the collaboration they had with their peers online had created synergy and were fun and enjoyable which is the third assumption of adult learners.

Participants stated that they found the entire process challenging which again caters to the assumption of adult learners, that they are problem-oriented. Their intrinsic motivation was high as they capitalized on their connections with their peers, e-tutors, and course coordinators to form a bond and celebrate their achievements, their birthdays and other special dates. Internal motivation is the fifth stereotypical assumption of adult learners who seek recognition and praise.

Findings from this study corroborate findings by other researchers. For example, Herrington et al. (2003) found that online students need to be given complex activities and need to collaborate. Similarly, Song et al. (2004) discovered that reflection, flexibility, and convenience were the forte of the online which supported the opinions of given by the participants. Muilenburg and Berge (2005) found that online enjoyment is strongly related to social interactions and learner motivation. The findings in this study of learner-learner and learner-instructor interactions and andragogical online learning further augment Muilenburg and Berge's conclusions.

7. Conclusions

The conclusions drawn in this study reiterate findings from other studies on online learning in respect to learner-learner, learner-instructor interactions and andragogical learning in the online environment. Further studies in the Caribbean context on such issues as Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) and how it has been embraced are recommended. Additionally, more expansive studies on the online learning contexts within the Caribbean with a

larger sample size and more nationalities could be compelling in understanding the challenges and barriers facing online learners.

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