

## An Exploration of Students' Experiences of Learning in an Online Primary Teacher Education Program

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### Abstract

This study examined students' experiences of learning in the Bachelor of Education Primary (Language Arts) program offered by the School of Education, The University of the West Indies (UWI), Trinidad, in partnership with UWI Open Campus (UWIOC). It is the first and only online program offered by the School at the University's St. Augustine Campus. A qualitative methodology was used to explore the experiences of eight students, who were selected using a purposive sampling strategy. The participants were selected from UWIOC sites in five islands in which the program is offered. Data were collected through audiotaped interviews, which were conducted face-to-face with students in Trinidad and Tobago and via Skype with students in the other islands. The findings suggest that, generally, the students' expectations of learning in the online program were met. Human, technology-related, and course-related factors seemed to facilitate students' learning in the program. The findings also indicate that students experienced some human, technology-related, and course-related challenges in the program.

**Keywords:** online teacher education, student expectations, facilitating factors, challenges, qualitative study, phenomenological study

### Introduction and Background

The study reported in this paper explored the experiences of students in the [Bachelor of Education Primary \(Language Arts\) online program](#) offered by the [School of Education](#) at the [University of West Indies \(UWI\), St. Augustine Campus](#) in partnership with [UWI Open Campus \(UWIOC\)](#). The program is designed for practicing teachers at the primary school level. Launched in 2007-2008, it was the first and only program at the School of Education, St. Augustine that was offered fully online. Online tutoring is the main mode of delivery in all of the courses. In addition, two or three audio conferences (commonly called "teleconferences") were usually conducted per semester in each of the courses.

The program was introduced in a phased way to the UWIOC countries. At the outset (in 2007-2008), the program was offered only to applicants in Trinidad and Tobago. In 2008-2009 and 2009-2010, the program was offered to five UWIOC countries. In 2010-2011, the program was offered to all of the 16 UWIOC countries across the region.

For most, if not all, of the students in the program, this was the first experience of learning in an online modality. Typically students had pursued studies in the traditional face-to-face programs. Similarly, this was the first experience of many of the e-tutors and course coordinators in the program in teaching an online course. While the mode of delivery was predominantly online, some face-to-face classes were held

in the first year of the program. The summer courses in the first year were offered face-to-face at the St. Augustine Campus.

In preparation for the program, the students were required to participate in three short courses to gain familiarity with the online processes and activities. One of the courses, *Orientation to Online Learning*, was conducted by the technicians at the various UWIOC sites. It was a hands-on training session designed to assist participants in becoming familiar with The Learning Exchange, the Moodle-based learning management system that the UWIOC uses for online teaching and learning.

The other two courses were offered online. *Improving Your Reading Skills* is a 5-week, fully tutored course that is intended to assist participants in enhancing their reading skills. It is a fully self-instructional course, with tutor assistance if required. *Improving Your Study Skills* is a 2-week course aimed at helping participants to improve their ability to manage their learning by finding out their specific learning styles and enhancing their time management skills.

Despite the orientation prior to the program, some students seemed to experience difficulties in their courses. In their capacities as Program Coordinator and Course Coordinator, the researchers in the present study noted some of the problems that students were experiencing and saw the need for a more systematic investigation. This was particularly important since no studies on this program had been conducted since its inception.

Although the sample was limited and the findings cannot be generalized, the research was expected to provide the researchers with a clearer insight into some of the challenges students face. This is critical if we are to provide students with meaningful learning experiences. Further, this study could provide a preliminary understanding of the effectiveness of the program delivery and implementation, and serve as a basis for making informed decisions and improvements.

The main question that this study sought to explore was:

*What are students' experiences of learning in an online environment?*

The sub-questions were as follows:

- 1) What facilitates learning in a program that is delivered mainly through online tutoring?
- 2) What inhibits learning in a program that is delivered mainly through online tutoring?

## Literature Review

Online education has gained increasing importance at all educational levels. At the tertiary level, it is one of the vehicles that offers adult learners the opportunity to pursue further education with a minimum of interruption to their work and family life. Participation in online programs is influenced by common characteristics shared by adult learners (O'Lawrence, 2006). These include flexibility, self-directed learning, relevance, opportunity for practical application, and the ability to integrate new learning with prior experience.

Opportunities for optimal learning in the online environment should be guided by sound principles. Chickering and Gamson (1987) propose seven principles of good practice. These principles – student–faculty contact, student–student collaboration, active learning, prompt feedback, focus on time on task, communication of high expectations, and respect for diverse abilities – can be applied to both online and traditional programs.

Several factors facilitate learning and foster a sense of optimal satisfaction in the online environment. [Menchaca and Bekele \(2008\)](#) identify a number of interrelated success factors. These are related to user characteristics, technology, course design and delivery, learning approach, and support services. However, in addition to an understanding of these success factors, researchers have highlighted the need for studies that investigate the perceptions, expectations, and experiences of learners in the online learning environment ([Ituma, 2011](#); [Paechter, Maier, & Macher, 2010](#); [Palmer & Holt, 2010](#)).

Studies of students in tertiary level programs have identified some concerns associated with online learning. One of the major concerns is the need for timely feedback ([Palmer & Holt, 2010](#)). In their investigation of what students valued in the online learning environment, Palmer and Holt found that students placed a high premium on feedback on assignments, viewing their marks, and reviewing unit progress.

Another critical element is support. In the online environment, students value support from their instructors and peers as well as technological support ([Castle & McGuire, 2010](#); [Palmer & Holt, 2010](#)). This support comes through a variety of online interactions that cater to the cognitive, social, and affective aspects of learning. Some researchers ([Eneau & Develotte, 2012](#); [Ferguson, 2010](#); [Jones & Issroff, 2005](#)) identify social and affective factors as important elements in online learning. In a study of students' experiences with peer interaction in an online program, Ferguson found that conferencing indirectly facilitated affective outcomes. Students valued "opportunities to avoid isolation, to compare themselves with other students, and to share frustrations about the course" (p. 581). Similar sentiments were expressed in Eneau and Develotte's research on the social and emotional aspects of learning through online discussion forums. The students commented on the positive role their peers had on their social and emotional wellbeing.

While some studies have examined the role of support in social and emotional dimensions of learning, others have focused on cognitive and academic dimensions. [Paechter et al. \(2010\)](#) used qualitative online interviews and questionnaires to investigate how students' expectations and experiences in an online course relate to their learning achievements and course satisfaction. Their findings highlight the role of the instructor in the learning process. Compared to other factors, the instructor's support in learning (and the interaction between instructor and students) contributed strongly to learning achievements and course satisfaction. From the students' perspective, the instructor's support was particularly important for their construction of knowledge, the acquisition of media competence, and for overall satisfaction with the course.

### Methodology

A qualitative approach was used in this study to gain an insight into the phenomenon of students' learning in the Bachelor of Education Primary (Language Arts) online program. Using a phenomenological approach, the study sought to understand what facilitated, and what impeded learning in the online environment through the experiences of the students themselves. According to van Manen (1990), phenomenological inquiry enables the researcher to discover the essence or underlying meaning of a phenomenon as experienced by the individuals in the setting.

Patton (2002) points to the methodological implications inherent in the use of a phenomenological approach:

This requires methodologically, carefully, and thoroughly capturing and describing how people experience some phenomenon – how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others. To gather such data, one must undertake in-depth interviews with people who have *directly* experienced the phenomenon of interest; that is, they have "lived experience" as opposed to secondhand experience. (p. 104, emphasis in original)

In order to obtain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon, eight students were selected for the study using a purposive sampling strategy. Purposive sampling facilitates the selection of individuals who allow the researcher to discover, understand, and gain insights into the central phenomenon in the study (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998). The participants were selected from the UWIOC sites in Trinidad, Tobago, St. Lucia, Grenada, and St. Vincent.

Participants in the study were given pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. The participants from the various sites were assigned the following names: Michelle, Gail, Rhonda, and Karen (Trinidad sites); Anna (Tobago site); Sandra (St. Lucia site); Richard (Grenada site); and Wendy (St. Vincent site).

Data were collected through audiotaped interviews with the participants. The interviews were conducted face-to-face with students located in Trinidad and Tobago and via Skype with the students who resided in the other islands. The interviews were semi-structured, and verbatim transcription was done.

The interview data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis, which is primarily concerned with understanding "the lived experience of the participant and the meaning which the participant makes of that lived experience" (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 80).

The process began with making notes and writing codes in the margins of the transcript. This initial stage of the data analysis involved commenting on the participants' unique use of language, looking for the deeper meanings, and making preliminary interpretations. As Smith et al. (2009) explain, this part of the

analysis involves "looking at the language they use, thinking about the context of their concerns (their lived world), and identifying more abstract concepts, which can help you to make sense of the patterns of meaning in their account" (p. 83).

Next, the initial notes and codes were transformed into themes, which took the data to a higher level of abstraction. The skill at this stage involves "finding expressions which are high level enough to allow theoretical connections within and across cases but which are still grounded in the particularity of the specific thing said" (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 68).

The final stage involved looking for connections among the emergent themes, and clustering similar themes. The emergent themes were cross-checked with the individual transcripts to ensure that, as Smith and Osborn (2008) put it, "the connections work for the primary source material – the actual words of the participant" (p. 72). This stage of the analysis was highly iterative and involved a close interaction between researcher/analyst and text.

Once the analysis of the individual transcripts was completed, the data from the eight students were compared to elucidate any similarities and differences in the students' experiences. In phenomenological terms, the objective of this cross-analysis was to capture the essence or underlying meaning of the shared experience.

Consistent with the principles of qualitative inquiry, measures were taken to establish trustworthiness of the findings. Since qualitative inquiry is based upon different assumptions and a different worldview than traditional research, writers argue for employing different criteria in assessing qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009). Conventional terms such as *validity* and *reliability* are considered inappropriate for research in the qualitative paradigm (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Two key strategies were utilized in the present study to establish trustworthiness or credibility of the findings. Firstly, the researchers engaged in member checking, which involved taking the data (the transcripts) back to the participants and asking them to clarify any areas of uncertainty in the data as well as any issues arising out of on-going analysis. In addition, the researchers sought to ensure that their interpretations of the data were in sync with the participants' meanings. The second strategy used for establishing trustworthiness was peer review. Both researchers analyzed the transcripts; this involved preliminary analysis of the transcripts independently, and then meeting to compare and discuss the initial notes assigned to the data, and the emerging themes. Peer review provided a check on the data analysis process, and helped in "exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the researcher's mind" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308).

## Findings

A number of themes emerged from the analysis of the students' accounts of learning in the online program. The findings are organized around three broad themes: (1) students' expectations; (2) facilitators of learning; and (3) constraints/inhibitors to learning.

### *Students' Expectations*

All of the participants in the study indicated that convenience was a major factor in their decision to opt for an online program. They were attracted to the flexibility it offered because it meant that they could schedule their study to suit their needs. Gail commented:

*"Well, it was more about convenience for me. I am a single mother, two children [sic], so it was the ideal setting for me."*

Anna expressed the view that:

*"Online programs give greater freedom than the rigidity of face-to-face lectures in classrooms with fixed schedules ... it is convenient in the sense that I am able to go to work, and I can do my own learning at my own time."*

They also expected to gain knowledge and skills required for delivering the Language Arts curriculum in the schools. Gail remarked:

*"Well, as an emerging professional, I thought I would get the skills, knowledge [sic] in order to get the best out of my students, in terms of the newest research and best practices. The focus for me was more on getting the skills, getting the know-how, and the philosophy behind what I am doing."*

However, Richard entered the program with a basic misunderstanding of what "online" meant. It seemed that he interpreted "online" as "online registration" instead of "online program." He explained:

*"I was expecting to have a face-to-face course [program], but then after signing up and getting into it, I realized that it was online and my first semester was quite difficult."*

Generally, the participants felt that their expectations were met in the program. Michelle noted:

*"I think thus far my expectations have been met because of what I've learnt, what I've been able to do. I've been able to provide some intervention for some children."*

#### *Facilitators of Learning*

- *Personal attributes/factors.* The analysis revealed a number of factors that facilitated the students' learning in the online environment. These ranged from personal to technological issues. Some personal attributes seemed to enable students to cope with the program. For example, students who had a personal commitment to their learning were able to cope much better:

*"Well I know [sic] it would have been rigorous. You know that fact, that it was kind of up to me, how much I did. Yes, there was the online support. But in terms of the scheduling, getting things done, it was up to me."* (Gail)

In addition, proper planning and time management were seen as key factors in their learning:

*"The onus is on the student to learn, so the student becomes more responsible for their learning. That is a plus ... you learn to manage your time better because you have to make time to do your studies."* (Anna)

On the other hand, Richard admitted that his inadequate time management negatively affected him:

*"I attended some of them [the teleconferences], very scantily ... sometimes I forget those dates. Like, I had one some time last week. I stayed back in school to attend a community meeting, then I came home. It's only afterward I saw on the screen somebody communicating about them being a part of the teleconference."*

- *Peer support.* A common view was the value of peer support, which was manifested in different ways. At times it took the form of collaboration for discussion of course content; but at other times it took the form of peer tutoring:

*"For everyone the experience would not be the same but there are times when the information was not forthcoming, and I sought the information from my other colleagues because we worked together."* (Wendy)

Often peer support was done outside of the online environment and students met in convenient locations for face-to-face interactions instead of the online chat forums that were featured in the courses. Some students had face-to-face interaction during the first year to discuss the course content and assignments, but later when they had gained more confidence their interactions were conducted via the telephone. Others worked individually at first, but by the final year they had face-to-face meetings to share ideas and collaborate on course assignments.

There was a social side to peer support. Sometimes emotional support was extended:

*"We do a lot of that, a lot of sharing, a lot of lending a shoulder when we realize that someone is overwhelmed. We had a student whose mom died, and then a few weeks after her grandmother died, and it was really tough for her ... so we were just checking up on her, encouraging her, and I think we had assignments due one after the other ... and she needed that kind of support."* (Sandra)

Often the support and networking resulted in the forging of friendships whether online through the discussion forums or in face-to-face meetings and collaborative activities:

*"I think the program is a good one because you get to interact with other Caribbean students so you are presented with a different perspective on the issues raised; you get to learn a bit about their custom, and you are able to share best practices and ... friendships developed as a result."* (Anna)

Yet, many students experienced a sense of isolation and "aloneness" in the online environment. Anna lamented:

*"Some people say they become [sic] lonely. They feel detached, and they feel that might be a way to humanize the experience, if they have that face-to-face contact."*

- *Support from other sources.* In addition to peer support, course personnel facilitated students' learning. The e-tutors prepared tutorials and responded to queries. In some instances, the course coordinators assumed the role of tutors and provided the necessary support when students were preparing assignments.

Open Campus site personnel also provided assistance to students. Some participants spoke of the encouragement and concern from the site coordinator. For example, Rhonda depended totally on the Open Campus site since she did not have Internet services at home and sometimes felt discouraged and overwhelmed. The encouragement from the Site Coordinator motivated her to continue.

Site technicians also played a critical supporting role in the use and navigation of the online platform. In one of the courses, students had to produce technical reports that contained a variety of media. They had difficulties reducing the size of the images to ensure that the file would fit in the assignment drop box. In addition to providing the necessary guidance, the technician also increased the size of the drop box to accommodate the assignments.

- *Online tools.* The participants found that online tools were useful in enhancing their learning. The discussion forum was a central part of the online experience. They were also exposed to YouTube videos, WebQuests, chats, and wikis. Karen reflected on her experience with wikis:

*"I think that was nice in that we get a wide range of views from others and it's a lot of research put together so you get a compact and very comprehensive report on that particular topic. So I think the wiki was a good thing."*

Although they did not have any during the program, students felt that web-conferencing could be used to substitute for face-to-face sessions:

*"At least one face-to-face session for the semester, just once; barring that, if they could have a video-conference."* (Anna)

However, there were mixed views about the online library. Only one participant was able to access and use it throughout the program.

*"It helped with my research for papers, for different assignments. We would go on and get into EBSCOhost [online platform for searching bibliographic/research databases] and get to view the journals and the articles easily."* (Gail)

Others were either unable to access the library or unable to navigate it to source information for their courses:

*"I can't seem to do what I have to, to get into the library. That's challenging me to get information because we don't have any [other] information source. Sometimes I just have to rely on the net [but] I want a way to get into the library."* (Richard)

Some of the online tools did not always facilitate learning since they were not used appropriately. For example, an attempt at using a real-time blog proved challenging for some students since they did not receive adequate instruction on using the tool:

*"And there was one course, we tried to go in at the same time and interface with the tutor. We tried that, but I found it difficult to follow because I would go in and ask a question, and the conversation would continue with something else and some other topic, and then they would catch on, and it was sort of difficult to follow ... but I think it is a useful tool, if you get used to it."* (Gail)

- *Teleconferences.* Teleconferences were generally valued. Most of the participants viewed them as opportunities for real-time interaction and feedback from peers and the course personnel. In one instance, the archived teleconferences were used as resources:

*"I have all my teleconferences on my flash drive so when an assignment is close I check it back to see 'am I really there?' That's just like your last checklist before you click that send button." (Rhonda)*

*"That's the only time you really get to discuss the course content, the material that was given to you. That is the only time you get to discuss the assignment for everybody to have the same understanding ... Most of the teleconferences were very encouraging and very helpful." (Sandra)*

Students in the other islands in particular saw the teleconference as an opportunity to connect with the course personnel, all of whom were based in Trinidad. They perceived a measure of inequity:

*"And then we are in Tobago. I don't know if our Trinidad counterparts could go to the campus and interact with the lecturers. But we don't have that at all. So we have to depend on the teleconference." (Anna)*

*"But we [in St. Vincent] are disadvantaged because we don't get to meet you at all. But the other students in Trinidad are right there with you." (Wendy)*

However, one participant felt that the teleconferences were useless:

*"I'll go and people are asking questions, and the answers are right there in the manual. About 60% of the teleconference time is spent answering questions, and the answers are there in the manual." (Gail)*

- *Course materials.* The data revealed that the participants believed that the course content and materials were of a high quality and contained relevant, up-to-date information:

*"I find they were well researched, very detailed. In this field things change, but they are even useful now, four years after." (Gail)*

Participants indicated that the course design and layout helped to facilitate their learning:

*"I like the layout of the units ... you have the different sessions, you have the objectives to be achieved, some have key words, and then you get into the unit, and you do the reading. At the end you have a summary or the wrap up." (Anna)*

Although the courses were organized using a basic format, some course coordinators were creative in the organization of their course web pages, which facilitated learning for some students.

- *Program quality.* The findings provided some mixed views on the program quality. Generally, the participants felt that the program was rigorous and of a high standard. They expressed the view that based on their conception of a Language Arts program, most of the courses were relevant and assisted them with making connections between the theories and methods and their classroom practice:

*"Language Arts courses ... that's all I was looking for and I got substance from there. The information in the course material ... I find it relevant; the references refer to things you can use in your classroom ... I took one of my handbooks back to school and my principal said, 'Well, you know I want to see this in your class.'" (Rhonda)*

*"Some of the information when I examine it fits right into where you're teaching in an institution; so my experience with some of the situations allow me to have input and expand on what I already know because I have some of the information already, and I could see where my experience connects with what is being taught." (Richard)*

However, participants questioned the relevance of a few of the courses that did not deal specifically with Language Arts. While they spoke highly of the quality of the course materials, participants preferred to have them in printed format instead of having them online only. They spoke of the convenience of having the material on hand to use at opportune times, and of some problems associated with reading from the computer for extended periods.

*Constraints/Inhibitors of Learning*

- *Lack of feedback.* Although there were a number of factors that facilitated students' learning on the online program, they experienced some constraints. The analysis indicated that feedback or support from e-tutors was the main issue for students, as reflected in the following comments:

*"There were times when we would ask questions, and we will expect [sic] responses, even at critical times when we needed information on completing assignments. And it wasn't timely at all. Sometimes, you reach the fourth phase of an assignment, not having received feedback on the first three phases." (Gail)*

*"Some of the tutors, they were not facilitating at all because when you needed them most they weren't there." (Michelle)*

- *Number of course activities.* With respect to course delivery, one of the constraints seemed to be the number of in-course activities students were expected to complete. While students acknowledged the usefulness, they felt that they were overdone. In the words of one student:

*"When you really check it out, the activities are leading you up to whatever assignment or exam that is coming up. But I will reiterate that there are too many. But if you try to do most of them, it makes it easier at the end, because ... you can use that to do your final assignment. Instead of having to go now and do all the readings to prepare for the assignment; you would have been preparing along the way. So it's like a stepping-stone, they're getting you ready for the final assignments." (Anna)*

She continued:

*"If there are not so many activities, you can make a response that is rich, enlightening, and informed. But because they rush, they just write something ... the tutors say, 'When you are responding to somebody's post, you should say something meaningful ... so if you have less activities, you could make more meaningful contributions.'" (Anna)*

- *Lack of face-to-face instruction.* The participants felt that they needed some face-to-face sessions for some courses that had a practical component:

*"I feel for some of the courses, we really need to have some face-to-face. Like we had a course in theatre, and we also had a course in media and technology, and for some of them, we have practical things being done, and we need to have someone there to guide you." (Karen)*

*"Now, there were one or two courses that I felt should be face-to-face. [For one course] reading the manual is like reading another language; we understand that, so we needed that kind of face-to-face help. It was really difficult doing those courses ... Now, what they said is that they would've enhanced it with videos and so on, which wasn't in place when we did it. If they do that, it would help." (Gail)*

- *Technological challenges.* For some of the participants, technological challenges were a major constraint. Some participants did not have a basic requirement for online learning, that is, Internet access. This meant that much of the time spent on the program was at the Open Campus site. For example, Rhonda lived in a rural area that had no Internet access and had to depend entirely on the Open Campus site, which was located in a town some distance away from her home.

At the beginning of the program, students were given an orientation to online learning. However, the findings suggested that the technological training might have been inadequate as participants experienced difficulties in some areas:

*"I was just shown how to open up [the course web page] and how to sign up and so on, not much more than that." (Richard)*

However, some of the participants gradually acquired technical skills through practice as the program progressed:

*"It [the online tutorial] was good because it helped you to maneuver within the site, the Learning Exchange. That was very helpful, and I continued to practice with the online tutorial for students. And they had a lot of activities for you to do which helped." (Anna)*



In one course, The Use of Media and the Production of Educational Materials, the technological skills required of the students seemed to be beyond their capabilities:

*"I think too, for somebody who knows much more about technology and the computer, that course targeted them ... I think you needed a little more foundation in technology and how the computer works and all these little things." (Rhonda)*

In summary, many of the students' expectations of the program were met. However, they experienced some challenges with program-related and personal areas.

### Discussion and Conclusion

The exploration of students' experiences of learning in an online environment has indicated an overall satisfaction with the program. The students' quest for a flexible program and professional development in the Language Arts area seemed to be fulfilled. The research literature has shown that adult learners value flexibility and self-tailored learning experiences ([Hunte, 2010](#); O'Lawrence, 2006). Further, adult learners need to see the immediate relevance of new learning: the skills, knowledge, and attitudes they are working to acquire ([Cercione, 2008](#); Vella, 2002). In the present study, the teachers appreciated the usefulness of the courses for practical classroom application in their different contexts.

On a personal level, a sense of commitment, proper planning, and time management enabled students to cope with the program. However, the lack of these qualities in others presented a challenge. Researchers argue that one of the critical features of successful online learning is personal organization ([Eneau & Develotte, 2012](#)). Also, O'Lawrence (2006) points out that with adult learners the most significant drawback in their learning is a lack of self-discipline and management skills.

In light of these findings, as the School of Education expands its online and blended programs, it should continue to ensure that learning experiences for the students are built on the relevant adult learning principles.

The findings have highlighted the importance students placed on the social and affective dimensions of learning, and how these were negotiated in the program. Students felt a sense of isolation and "aloneness" in the online environment, and longed for ways of humanizing their learning experience. Similarly, [Dell, Hobbs, and Miller \(2008\)](#) report that students in their study found this to be a challenge. In the present study, social interaction seemed to take place more via physical meetings and telephone contact than in the online environment. Although chat forums are intended to facilitate online social interaction, very little use was made of them. [Ituma \(2011\)](#) also reports that students rarely used the chat forums, but favored communication via personal e-mails.

[Motteram and Forrester \(2005\)](#) observe from their examination of students' experiences of induction to distance programs that "social presence" is important in online teaching and learning. However, the degree of social presence is often constrained by external circumstances such as managing work and home life. In the present study, this might have accounted, in part, for the students' preference for interaction outside of the online environment. More importantly, this was the students' first experience with online learning, and perhaps they were falling back on the traditional mode of interaction to which they were accustomed.

Not surprisingly, students indicated a preference for a blend of online and face-to-face modes of delivery, particularly for subjects with practical components. [Motteram and Forrester \(2005\)](#) found that distance students felt isolated because of their physical separation from the university and appreciated technology tools that brought a more human element to the program. [Castle and McGuire \(2010\)](#) and [Menchaca and Bekele \(2008\)](#) discovered that student satisfaction was higher when there were opportunities for face-to-face meetings or the use of technologies that simulated them, for example, synchronous interactions such as video/web-conferencing. Further, [Hunte \(2010\)](#) recommends the use of appropriate technologies to deal with the sense of isolation online students experience. Although teleconferences were used throughout our program, they did not adequately meet the students' need for real-time interaction.

In the online environment, interaction with instructors helps to humanize the experience and facilitates learning. Research on online teaching and learning indicates that prompt feedback is considered one of the pillars of good practice in online programs ([De Gagne & Walters, 2010](#); [Martyn, 2003](#)); yet, a lack of timely feedback is often cited as an issue among online students ([Appana, 2008](#); [Menchaca & Bekele, 2008](#); [Puzziferro & Shelton, 2009](#)). This was a major concern for the students in the present study.

In addition to feedback, students in the present study indicated that factors such as the course layout and course materials facilitated their learning. Participants also valued the developmental nature of the in-course activities yet this value seemed to be undermined by the excessive number in individual courses. [Martyn \(2003\)](#) proposes that active learning methods are pillars of good practice in online learning. Moreover, [Castle and McGuire \(2010\)](#) note:

The most important component across all course delivery modalities is course content; outstanding advanced technology and instructor competence and the ability to "connect" with students have little impact if course content material does not facilitate and reinforce the learning experience. (p. 38)

Technology-related issues also presented a challenge for students. At one level, students did not have Internet access, and on the other, while access was available, students lacked the necessary skills to use it. These can be explained in terms of [DiMaggio and Hargittai's \(2001\)](#) "inequality in autonomy of use" (p. 9) and "inequality in skill" (p. 10). Students without Internet access at home experienced inequality in terms of use since they had to depend on an external source for access. This meant that there were breaks in online communication and interaction that occurred over certain periods such as weekends and public holidays. On the other hand, some students had the technology available but lacked the skill to use it effectively. This has implications for the design and delivery of online programs. Consideration should be given to the diverse social, economic, and demographic contexts of learners and the need to provide the different types of support. [Menchaca and Bekele \(2008\)](#) also found that students experienced technical difficulties in the online learning environment. [Martyn \(2003\)](#) highlights the need to recognize that students begin online programs with a wide range of technical skills and backgrounds, and stresses the importance of the initial orientation in bringing students to a minimum technological skill level to ensure success in online courses. Similarly, [Hunte \(2010\)](#) and [Kuboni, Thurab-Nkhosi, and Chen \(2002\)](#) report on students' lack of computer skills in online programs, and recommend a more concerted effort in providing orientation and training in computer and Internet skills.

This study was an important step in understanding the experiences of learners in the Bachelor of Education Primary (Language Arts) online program. It has revealed that factors at the human, course, and technological levels all impacted learning in the online environment. The findings also align with [Palmer and Holt's \(2010\)](#) observation that many of the elements that students valued were not specific to the online environment, but were essential to teaching and learning regardless of the mode of delivery.

Although there are different models for online programs, the hybrid model seems to be the most favored. [Martyn \(2003\)](#) proposes a hybrid model that is worthy of consideration. He suggests a combination of face-to-face and online interaction, in which the orientation and closure are face-to-face sessions and the rest of the program is conducted online.

More research is needed to explore the views of other personnel, such as instructors and technical support staff, to gain a holistic understanding of online and blended programs at the School of Education. The insights to be gained from such studies can inform the design and development of future programs.

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