Strategies for Success: An Autoethnographical Study of Adult Online Master's Degree Recipients Activity Log

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Over the past decade, the researcher has completed two university degrees from accredited Canadian universities through online distance education (ODE) offerings. Research suggests that these experiences and subsequent acquisition of university degrees through ODE are not the norms (Clay et al., 2009; Hart 2012; Lee & Choi, 2010). The researcher wondered how one succeeded in obtaining degrees through ODE when others do not? The purpose of this research project is to identify characteristics shared by successful adult students in an ODE master's degree program, common challenges they faced, and the strategies they used to achieve success. By examining the experiences encountered as an ODE student along with the experiences of other ODE students, the researcher hoped to raise ODE student awareness of challenges they may face and identify strategies that may help guide ODE students to success when pursuing their degree.

Background

I was a university dropout. In my early 30s, I chose to return to university, completing an undergraduate and later a master's degree via ODE. I was hardly in a position to quit my job and return to the classroom. I was married with familial commitments and a partner whose work mandated his absence from home. ODE seemed to be the perfect modality for pursuing formal education in my field. The flexibility offered through ODE – that of time, place, and space – was an enticing sales pitch (Daniel, 2016; Naidu, 2017). ODE offered the opportunity to retain current employment and income levels while meeting familial commitments and remaining in the community. Through ODE, I could attend the university of my choice without requiring relocation, complete coursework when and where my schedule allowed, and finance my degree one class at a time. ODE was the promised land of learning anytime, anywhere.

The fact that university degree programs delivered through ODE at the institutions I attended were not as flexible as advertised quickly became apparent. Time and place became barriers to completing my education. Course designs, including web-based lectures, timed discussion postings, and group work, may have promoted integration and community learning among ODE course participants; however, these activities laid the notion that courses could be completed on any schedule, as my time allowed. Mandatory attendance in scheduled, synchronous sessions ensured access to professors and required juggling work schedules and recalculating due dates to reflect alternate time zones. Participant location became a barrier as access as technology was not always functioning, available, or affordable. Access to people, spaces, and services I had taken for granted when previously enrolled as an on-campus student was inaccessible to me as an ODE student. Where mitigation strategies existed, such as receiving library books via post, delivery turnaround time became an additional barrier. If the very things that make ODE enticing to students also act as barriers, how do ODE students succeed?

Research Questions

This research resulted from reflections on my own experiences as an adult learner, comparing and contrasting these experiences with dropout factors previously documented in the published literature (Goomas & Clayton, 2013; Lee & Choi, 2010; Lee et al., 2013; Olesova et al., 2011). The research questions guiding this project were:

RQ1

What characteristics did successful adult learners have in common?

RQ2

What challenges did participants experience in pursuit of their degree through ODE?

RQ3

What strategies did participants use to address their challenges?

Literature Review

The term "adult learner" can mean many things to different people. For this research, the adult learner is used to describe ODE students over the age of 25 who reside off-campus and attend school part-time (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Grabowski et al., 2016; Meyer 2014). Over 40% of current university students fall under the adult learner classification (Meyer, 2014; NCES; 2017). I am an adult learner

I chose ODE to continue working and living within my community while simultaneously pursuing a degree at a university located elsewhere in the country. Increasingly, adult learners choose to complete their degree online (Allen et al, 2016; Asunda et al, 2014; Hagelskamp et al., 2013; NCES, 2017; Yuan & Kim, 2014). Enrollments have increased significantly in the past 20 years, a trend expected to continue (Hout, 2012; Grabowski et al., 2016; Markle, 2015). However, less than half of the enrolled ODE students will complete their online degree programs (Clay et al., 2009; Hagelskamp et al., 2013; Lee & Choi, 2010). Student dropout rates have been studied for decades (Bean & Mezner, 1985; Rovai, 2003; Rovai, 2012; Tinto, 1975).

Since the development and revision of Rovai's (2003; 2012) Composite Persistence Model (CPM), there has been an increasing amount of published data relating to student success and dropout factors in online learning courses (Clay et al., 2009; Hart, 2012; Lee & Choi, 2010; Lee, Choi & Kim, 2013; Olesova et al, 2011). Studies have mainly been limited to student persistence or dropout factors at the individual course level (Goomas & Clayton, 2013; Lee & Choi, 2010; Lee et al., 2013), with few studies following a cohort of individuals through the completion of bachelor's or graduate-level university degree programs (Meyer, 2014; Muller, 2008). Additionally, existing research tends to focus on dropout factors instead of strategies students adopt to facilitate persistence in their ODE studies (Clay et al., 2009; Lee & Choi, 2010). Despite a 40+ year focus on student dropout factors, there does not appear to be a noticeable increase in student persistence and completion rates at the course or degree level (Hagelskamp et al., 2013; Hart 2012; Lee & Choi, 2010; Siemens et al, 2015). Additional exploration of the ODE degree student's experience is necessary to identify and separate factors that impact a student's persistence in a single course from those impacting adult learners throughout an ODE degree.

Attempting to identify why some adult students complete ODE degree programs required searching for common student characteristics. Research suggests adult learner demographics (age, gender, hours worked) have little to no impact on student dropout or persistence rates (Hart, 2012; Lee et al., 2013; Park & Choi; 2009). Bandura (1997) suggested that academic self-efficacy – a belief in an individual's capacity to perform specific academic tasks – is an essential factor for academic success is supported by Holder's (2007) research relating to learner motivation and persistence (Hart, 2012; Lee et al., 2013). This study intends to explore the common characteristics, challenges faced, and strategies employed by members of a Master's of Education cohort who completed their degree through ODE.

Method

Fundamental theories and methods of this study include autoethnography, grounded theory, and narrative theory. The section ends with the results of the data analysis. Returning to university as an adult student is a topic that is closely entwined with my own identity. It would not be possible to remove my experiences and biases from any research completed on this topic. Autoethnography is a form of qualitative research that combines ethnography and self-reflection into an autobiographic writing style (Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2007). It provides a method for viewing the research project from an insider position, considering and emphasizing personal experiences in the research, analysis, and results (Adams, Holman Jones & Ellis, 2015; Starr, 2010). As I embarked on, yet another educational journey facilitated through ODE, autoethnography provides an opportunity to reflect on what has/has not worked in the past with an eye to the future.

During this reflection process, my primary memory aids were retrieved from handwritten journals, social media posts, and online blog entries, totaling 168 pages of text written between June 2014 and December 2016. To address Holt's (2003) critique that autoethnography may rely too heavily on memory and self-reflection, I augmented the literature and reflective data with data collected from my former master's cohort members. These external sources supplied 'hard' data to back up the potentially self-indulgent, self-censored, or overly individualized reflections, as Duncan & Fellow (2004) recommended.

Risks

Employing ethnography and autoethnography risks potential ethical situations arising from power dynamics between the researcher and participants (Blanchard, 2016; Kendall & Halliday, 2014). An element of vulnerability is present whenever individuals are asked to share their reflections on past experiences, including impressions and feelings that arise in the telling (Blanchard, 2016; Kendall & Halliday, 2014). Participants must determine their comfort level in exposing portions of themselves and their history in their responses, trusting in both the researcher and process that their secrets and sense of selves will be respected in the final work. To help establish this trust during the data collection process, participants received an invitation package, including a research project. Participants signed an informed consent form acknowledging the research intent, plan, and exit process.

Grounded and Narrative Theory

I approached the research utilizing a combination of grounded & narrative theory. Grounded theory offers an open-ended and inductive approach, allowing me to react to the data gathered rather than attempting to fit the data into pre-existing theoretical frameworks (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; 2017; Grix, 2010; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007; Wiesche et al., 2017). The narrative provides an opportunity to examine the "lived experience" (Wertz et al., 2011). How people tell and how others interpret these narratives provides insight into choices made, focusing on elements personally significant to them and downplaying activities or actions of less import (Lackoff & Johnson, 2003; Wertz et al., 2011). Collecting and examining data in narrative form positions the experiences in their broader context, including personal and environmental factors and temporal situations.

Participants

Invitations to participate in the research project were sent electronically to 18 graduates of an ODE Master's of Education program at a mid-sized western Canadian university. Invitations included a written overview of the project and a participation consent form. Participants were informed that all data collected would be anonymized and were offered the opportunity to review the final paper. Participants opted into the research by returning a signed copy of the consent form, resulting in a self-selected sample of 10 individuals. Including myself, there were four male and seven female participants.

Participants varied in age from mid-20s to early 50s and were employed in related educational careers (e.g., K-12 teacher, Instructional Designer, Educational Technologist). All but one participant was married, and six were parents with one or more children aged 3-16 at home. Participants followed individual paths of study, enrolling in elective classes based on areas of interest. Distributed geographically across four Canadian provinces and four-time zones, participants were members of the same cohort, beginning their graduate studies together.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected through questionnaires and semi-structured phone or web-conference interviews. Individuals' lived experiences were shared through autobiographical accounts of their graduate student experience as told through their lens (Coffey & Atkinson 1996; Lackoff & Johnson, 2003; Wertz et al., 2011). Participants reflected on past experiences and selected what was essential for them to share within the study context.

All participants completed an electronic questionnaire. Questions focused on the individual's experiences in the program, including obstacles faced and techniques used to address the obstacle. Participants were asked to consider all factors from which challenges may have arisen when drafting their responses.

Four of the 11 participants also took part in additional semi-structured interviews lasting between 29 and 49 minutes. Open-ended questions were guided by the participant's descriptions

of their experiences in the program i.e., why they chose an ODE program, what were their expectations of the program, what challenges they faced during the program, and how they addressed those challenges over time. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Data gathered through reflection, interviews, and literature review were used to address the three research questions. Glaser and Strauss's (1967) constant comparison technique was used to analyze interview and questionnaire data. (Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Wiesche et al., 2017). Both the questionnaire responses and interview transcripts were read before coding. Data was reviewed line-by-line through open coding and assigned codes based on content and context to produce an initial code list (Saldana, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Wiesche et al., 2017). Using an inductive approach, the contents of this more extensive code list were searched for recurring patterns emerging from participants' responses (Saldana, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). These codes were then selectively combined into categories mirroring the research questions and classified as follows:

- characteristics
- challenges, and
- strategies.

I coded my data last, then compared the codes I'd self-assigned to those of other participants. Post categorization, I compared my own experiences with those of the participants and the literature, interpreting the findings.

Results

Characteristics

Characteristics included the participant has expressed attitudes or beliefs about themselves, their roles, or their expectations. All participants self-identified as having a high locus of control over their educational outcomes (Lee et al., 2013; Rotter, 1966). Having a high level of drive and control was not the only way participants saw themselves. Citing their "stubborn nature," 71% of women attributed their ODE success to this trait. Introversion and a personal preference for reflexive activities were reported by 64% of participants.

Figure 1 demonstrates how self-identified characteristics of participants were further categorized upon identification. These characteristics were described as having a positive impact on participants' successful completion of their ODE degree program.

Controlled and Driven

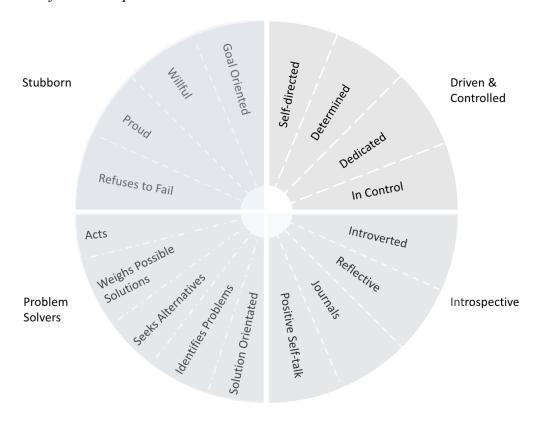Participants attributed their success to their controlled and driven natures, stating:

- "…no matter what happened, I was always moving forward step-by-step and day-by-day."
- [I am] "the type of person who likes to take control. I don't let things get in my way."
- "When I set my mind to something, I always get it done".

- "To be successful you had to be self-directed, you had to be disciplined in order to be able to get through".

In my own emailed response to a professor I wrote "I don't need the answer. Let me figure it out for myself. I CAN do this." The idea of giving up or quitting may have reared its ugly head a time or two over the years but was ultimately dismissed; deemed unacceptable.

Figure 1

Identified Participant Characteristics

Introspective

Over half of respondents self-identified as introverts in their questionnaire or interview responses. Connecting their concept of introversion with reflexivity and face-to-face interaction, participants mentioned preferring the ODE course's opportunity to "reflect on what I had read before responding" and "think about what I wanted to say before writing a response to someone else's post.". I was not surprised to find the following journal entry I had written at the beginning of the second year:

I spent a few days in a classroom this week. Exhausting! Attempting to pay attention to what's going on in the room, group work, constant surrounding noise – at the end of each day I am drained. … I'm glad class is online. It's a blessing being removed from the physical classroom … There's still time to think.

Problem Solvers

Participants also described themselves as problem solvers, a comfortable mental model for most participants to build their sense of self. Shannon wrote, "I'm a natural-born problem solver. Perhaps it's the teacher in me. I see something wrong and I want to fix it", while Michael wrote, "I'm good at figuring out when things don't work and how to make it fit." I am most comfortable in technical environments, searching out the error or missing piece, and attempting to find a suitable solution to the problem. The act of problem-solving may be shared amongst respondents; however, results indicate that their approach to problem-solving in their ODE context differed along gender lines. Females tended to look externally for solutions while males removed themselves from the situation.

Stubbornness

While few references to the emotional state were made outside of feelings relating to stress or connectivity, five of the seven women in the study attributed their success at overcoming challenges and persistence in the program to "having a stubborn nature." The sixth described herself as persistent, saying, "… when I set my mind to something. I usually [pause] well, sometimes it takes me a while to get it done. Nevertheless, I'm usually pretty persistent in general. I think that's just my upbringing and my personality." This theme of intentionally managing their persistence by being "unwilling to allow myself to fail" or "stubborn as a mule" repeated itself in every interview or questionnaire received from female participants. Unexpectedly, no male participants attributed their persistence or success to stubbornness. Determining whether this discrepancy is due to how men and women internalize and describe their behavior perceptions. If the underlying attitudes or activities of men and female completers are significantly different, outside of this research's scope remains a possible area for future research.

Stubbornness also manifested in pride, refusals to fail, willfulness, and an apparent affinity towards goal acquisition. In an old journal entry, I had written:

I remember being 14 months in, and I couldn't remember why I was doing this to myself. Sleepless nights. No social life. Always feeling on edge. I was putting way too much pressure on myself. But then I remembered how it felt to have my voice dismissed at meetings because I didn't have a piece of paper I could point to that said "I know what I'm talking about". I was damned well going to get that piece of paper if it killed me.

One participant wrote "I told everyone I could that I was working on my Masters. I was very proud of that. It kept me on track. I told people I was studying so now I had to get the degree." Stubbornness and pride continued to be motivating factors throughout my degree program as evidenced by a journal entry I'd written weeks before commencement: "No matter how tired I was,

or how stupid I felt, I just kept slogging away at it. My pride wouldn't accept failure as an option." Stubborn. Determined. Prideful. Perhaps how we perceived ourselves was everything in the end?

Challenges

Challenges encompassed external factors identified by students as they progressed through their master's program included:

- access to information and services typically available to on-campus students,
- access to materials,
- access to study spaces,
- access to technology,
- impact of time zones when managing attendance at online activities, and
- stressors relating to time, finances, family, and employment (workload).

Access, Content, and Time

Challenges relating to course content were assigned a lower level of importance by study participants. When content was mentioned, it was often in the context of connectivity (lack of shared participant background) or time (requiring more time than anticipated to complete tasks). This suggests that students both anticipated challenges understanding content and expected that this would be a normal part of the learning process.

Participants experienced difficulties accessing materials and attending online lectures when the promise of "anywhere" hit technical roadblocks in the form of unreliable Internet access. I found the "anywhere" promise land elusive after deciding I was unwilling to pay high Internet access fees while traveling abroad. "Anytime" was equally challenging for those located outside of the university's geographic area.

External Stressors

External stressors were inescapable; whether it was a death in the family, illness, changing financial situation, or a husband shipped to a war zone mid-semester, each student was impacted. Participants noted how easy it was to become overwhelmed by the constant workload, financial concerns, and family commitments. Equally dangerous was the temptation to "slack off." One participant explained that falling behind created additional stress and suggested it as a reason why some students are unsuccessful in ODE programs:

> the workload and the deadlines just kept piling up if you got even a little bit behind. It's easy to feel like you'd never find your way out from under it. I can imagine how that might make people want to quit.

How much time was available for participants to meet all internal and external commitments to the program impacted their perceived stress levels. Participants reported higher than usual stress levels when they felt they had insufficient time to complete their school assignments or manage

family and social commitments. When simultaneously increased demands on their time were received from school, family, and workload, participants reported feeling overwhelmed. Of note is participant behavior surrounding their stressors. Quitting work or social commitments were seen as acceptable methods for addressing the temporary stresses associated with the workload. Quitting the ODE program was not.

Strategies

Strategies were actions taken by participants to alleviate the challenges they experienced. Results indicated that preferred strategies were divided based on participant gender. To address challenges relating to access, content, time, and stress, women described using methods such as:

- changing financial situations by applying for grants or seeking new forms of employment,
- envisioning the end goal to provide continued motivation,
- meditation and positive self-talk to alleviate stress,
- reducing social commitments to free up study time, and
- seeking help from others to share household and family obligations.

While they often relied on their partners or other family members to assist with household and familial obligations, female participants were unlikely to leave their home to study. Females were also more likely to ask for, accept, and help in childcare and household management from friends and family than their male counterparts.

In their responses, males escribed limited feelings of stress. Male participants did not reduce paid working hours to address the challenge of time and workload. More pragmatic in their responses, they solved their lack of time to complete coursework by removing themselves from their homes and reducing social commitments, such as coaching or participating in sports teams. Some participants mentioned spending 3-4 evenings a week on-campus studying while others stayed late at work 2-3 times a week. One participant locked himself in a home office each weeknight from 6-10 PM. When deadlines loomed, these same behaviors were repeated on weekends. While they lamented missing out on spending time with their children and missing social activities, they also expressed the expectation that their wives would manage household chores and childcare while they were enrolled in school.

What Lies Between?

How participants described their attitudes towards challenges faced, including:

- what they choose to describe as a challenge,
- what was discounted as unimportant, and
- the strategies they employed to address the challenges

were equally important in identifying commonalities among successful participants. Responses were rooted in participants' expressed beliefs about the nature of the ODE Masters program or

self-image. Lines were drawn between program expectations, self-identified personality traits, and the role of the individual in their household. These results are presented below.

Connectivity and Isolation

While the concept of connectivity was remarked on by most respondents, it was referred to as both a challenge and a strategy for mitigating challenges. Whether participants viewed their connection to the program, other students, services, and materials as positive or negative was heavily influenced by their attitudes towards the program, internalized beliefs about personality traits, and desired or anticipated level of interaction. In her interview, Janice explained feeling isolated from the program, leading her to seek out scholarships and fellowships, quit her job, and became a full-time ODE student with an on-campus presence:

> ..as a fully online student and a distance student I did feel kind of disconnected from the program at times. … I felt like maybe I was missing out on some things that a face to face student or grad student on campus would have access to. Mentorship opportunities and part-time jobs and research positions - those kinds of things are harder to come by when you're not on campus (Janice).

Study participants expressed feelings of geographic isolation, but not social isolation. One recalled that she "spent way more time interacting with my cohort members through this degree than any of my other degrees. "That so many of the cohort self-identified as being introverted might explain their lack of feeling socially isolated from their peers."

Discussion

This research was centered on a search for answers to the following questions:

RQ1: What characteristics did successful adult learners have in common?

Participants in this study self-identified as driven, controlled, stubborn, introspective, problem solvers. With an eye towards the goal, the participants' tenacity to succeed was supported by their ability to adapt and stick to schedules and routines. In my case, the level of control I believed I had over the end results often hinged on my stubborn refusal to fail and willful nature. Like myself, participants expressed a tendency towards introversion, "naval gazing," and a preference for "mulling things over" prior to delivering responses.

RQ2: What challenges did participants experience?

Challenges reported included coursework, difficulties accessing materials or services, geographic location impacting technology, juggling time zones, access to study spaces, and stressors relating to time, family, and employment (workload). Throughout the results, challenges were consistently acknowledged and accepted, at times, with a fatalistic attitude. The identified challenges were not seen as enough reason to change course - even when multiple challenges occurred at the same time.

RQ3: What strategies did participants use to address their challenges?

Financial concerns were resolved by applying for grants or seeking new forms of employment. Participants addressed challenges arising from technology, time zones, or geographic location by changing their work and sleep schedules. To free up time for study, participants reduced familial and social commitments, with some seeking help from others to share household and family obligations. Others relied on regimented study schedules or removed themselves to an alternate location to study uninterrupted. Acceptance, asking for help, meditation, and positive self-talk were methods used to alleviate stressors.

Recommendations

The findings described in the Results section may raise a potential or existing ODE students' awareness of what to expect in an ODE program; however, the results do not address putting this new knowledge into practice. The following recommendations were derived from the results and may guide adult learners towards successful completion of an ODE program.

Know What You Are Getting Into

Each participant mentioned flexibility of time, place and space as a major reason for selecting the ODE Masters program. Participants advised ODE "accommodated work and personal schedules" while providing "an opportunity to keep teaching while pursuing my education". I too had been sold on the idea of anytime, anywhere learning. Despite its allure, when the promise of a flexible learning experience didn't play out as advertised, it became a source of stress and a challenge to be overcome. This, in turn, prompted students to seek out mitigation strategies in order to progress. A study participant remarked:

> … the syllabus said we'd be spending 12-15 hours a week on coursework … but then I found myself spending 20-30 hours a week reading, responding to discussions, and writing. I had to quit my weekly beer league basketball game to find the time to complete the work.

A cohort member found herself attending courses at 11 PM in her pyjamas while I worked through lunch, juggling work schedules to attend classes scheduled before my normal workday ended.

Recommendations

- Ask others about the program or courses before enrolling. A quarter of study participants described reaching out to current and former students regarding their experiences in the program prior to enrollment. These respondents reported experiencing less program-related stress and indicated that their expectations were aligned with what they experienced.
- Identify risks early. Review course schedules as soon as possible to identify potential conflicts between course load, workload, and familial or social commitments. Plan mitigation strategies in advance.

- Prioritize your education. Schedule dedicated time to focus on coursework. If possible, create a dedicated study space.
- Research how courses in the program are designed. ODE programs with synchronous components may have an impact on existing routines or schedules. There may be less flexibility in a program with scheduled synchronous activities.

Practice Self-Care

Study participants remarked that the impact of stressors was mitigated through self-care activities such as journaling, meditation, or participation in social or physical activities. Five of the seven female participants described using positive self-talk as a method of dealing with stressors encountered while attending school.

While it's important to believe in yourself, positive self-talk wasn't limited to tooting one's own horn. One participant used the technique when she felt the pressures of time, deadlines or when she felt overworked:

And then the other thing I would say is, this is something I reminded myself of, and it was just that it wouldn't last forever, and that if I felt stressed for overwork to were discouraged or any of those kinds things, which I did at times, for sure that it was always gonna be temporary (Janice).

I recall adopting the mantra that "this too shall pass" when I felt like I was drowning under the weight of school, work and family. How quickly stressors passed was often up for debate.

Recommendations

- Ask for help. In their questionnaires, 80% of study participants answered, "ask for help" when asked "If you knew then what you know now, what piece of advice would you give yourself?"
- Build time to practice a preferred method of self-care into your schedule.

Envision the Goal

Each member of the cohort entered the ODE program for their own reasons. Some were seeking career changes, pay raises, or promotions. Others sought to better understand advances in educational technology or the teaching profession, while one simply wanted to learn for the sake of learning. While they had all set clear goals to achieve, envisioning the goal was a preferred method for dealing with the stress arising from juggling multiple roles as student, employee, and family member.

Recommendations

- Develop a mental picture of successful goal achievement. Study participants noted that the ability to articulate their goals to others helped them stay focused on the result.
- Select and prioritize goals. Use a process map to help visualize goals. Write down the actions necessary to achieve the goal and focus on completing each of the steps needed to achieve the goal.

Limitations

There were three key limitations to this study, demographic, temporal, and modality. Based on these limitations, it is not advisable for the findings from this small-scale study to be generalized to a wider population; however, they do provide insight into some successful graduate students' experiences in a specific degree program delivered through ODE. Study limitations are as follows.

Demographic Limitation

To mitigate the risk of being overwhelmed by data, I chose to limit subject participation to individuals who have been awarded a master's degree from a specific university and cohort. In addition, fewer male graduates agreed to participate in the study, and no male participants were available to complete the interview portion. This gender-based split in data collection influenced the amount of data available for coding and its interpretation. Partway through the research some emerging themes began to appear relating to socioeconomics, family composition, employment status, and age. While I had not included questions specific to these topic areas in my instruments some participants shared information freely as part of their interviews or questionnaire responses. As a result, I had insufficient data to infer findings relating to these topics in this study. Further exploration of the above noted emerging themes impact on ODE student success is recommended.

Temporal Limitations

The four-week time period provided to complete the research required participants to be willing to become involved in the research on short notice; allowing little time for in-depth reflection on their experiences. To keep responses at a manageable level, I forwarded invitations to participants in waves, which may have limited reflection time for some participants in the study. A follow-up study revisiting the questions after participants have had additional time to reflect on their experiences may provide a less rushed and more robust set of data with which to work.

Modality Limitations

Questionnaires were designed to allow study participants to reflect on past experiences and focus their responses on items they deemed essential to their context. This design decision was made to identify commonalities within the response data. By not guiding respondents to specific topic areas, I anticipated a more robust data set to code and interpret the results. However, this format also allowed participants to sanitize their experience, providing the opportunity to gloss

over the nature or impact of challenges or put a higher emphasis on the values of strategies and solutions employed, highlighting wins and removing the spotlight from potential failures.

Conclusions

I began this study in an attempt to understand how I was able to complete multiple university degree programs through ODE if high dropout rates were the norm for this modality. I sought to learn if there something unique about my nature or if there a set of common characteristics found in adult learners that earmarked them for success. Did we use similar techniques to overcome challenges?

Over the course of the research, I identified common characteristics shared by my fellow students. I documented common challenges faced by ODE students and determined strategies participants used to overcome these challenges. Common to the results was the participants' expressed belief that they had an internal locus of control over the outcome (Lee et al., 2013; Rotter, 1966). Their responses to challenges, driven by their underlying attitudes, influenced their decision-making process and subsequent behavior throughout the ODE degree program. A series of recommendations were derived from the results to help guide adult learners toward completing an ODE program.

Suggestions for Future Research

Results also indicated an identifiable split between genders, how they defined themselves as learners, what they considered obstacles, and how they addressed them. I am left wondering if social norms and gender roles influence motivation and strategies learners employ to complete an ODE graduate degree? Alternatively, could these differences reflect how members of each gender use language to describe past events? Additional studies would be required to further explore the nature of gender's influence on adult learners' ODE experience.

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