Life-Context Interactions and their Contributions to
Postgraduate Distance Learning

by

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy (Education)

Deakin University

March, 2015
I am the author of the thesis entitled

Life-Context Interactions and their Contributions to Postgraduate Distance Learning

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Acknowledgments

To undertake a thesis while simultaneously becoming a mother requires the love and support of many people. My heartfelt thanks to my partner Richard for his unfailing love and support throughout the years it has taken to complete this research project. My gratitude also to my mother for taking care of my daughter while I attended conferences and Summer Schools, to my parents-in-law for providing me with both intellectual discussion about my thesis and practical help with my daughter, and to the various child carers and educators who looked after my daughter and made it possible for me to study.

Thank you to my supervisors Associate Professor Mary Dixon and Professor Terry Evans for their expert guidance and insightful critique, and for their unhesitating support for my decision to combine doctoral work with motherhood. Thank you also to each of the participants in this study for their time and their honesty in sharing their thoughts and experiences with me.

Thank you to my friends for their encouragement, understanding and patience with my reduced level of communication and participation in social events, and thank you to my brother for his companionship in sharing part of my journey.

Lastly, thank you to my father for the gifts of my work ethic and capacity to persevere in the face of adversity, without which this journey would not have been possible, and also to my much-loved but long gone great-aunt Doris Watson, who had to forego motherhood in order to pursue a career in education and would be thrilled to see me combining the two in this more enlightened era.
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**Glossary**

**Concept**

A structured mental representation of a phenomenon that has been given an agreed label (Laurence & Margolis, 1999; Hupcey & Penrod, 2005).

**Disciplinary concept**

A structured mental representation of a phenomenon that concerns the scholars within a particular academic field who have given it an agreed label and a highly specific meaning that is socially constructed with reference to disciplinary theory but may not be commonly understood by the general populace (Toulmin, 1972; Laurence & Margolis, 1999; Hupcey & Penrod, 2005; Weiskopf, 2011).

**Distance education**

“Teaching and planned learning in which the teaching normally occurs in a different place from learning, requiring communication through technologies, as well as special institutional organisation” (Moore & Kearsley, 2012, p. 2).

**Distance learners**

Learners that enrol in programs of study delivered largely or wholly by distance education.

**Interactions**

Reciprocal actions between two or more actors within a given context (Vrasidas, 1999, p. 33).

**Life-context interactions**

Interactions occurring between distance learners and other people in their personal and professional lives about their studies, including their immediate and extended family members, their friends, acquaintances and community connections, their work colleagues and wider network of peers, and the managers and leaders within their organisation and industry or profession.
Ordinary language concept

A structured mental representation of a phenomenon that is of concern to the general populace and has been given an agreed label, a socially constructed meaning and a definition that usually can be found in a dictionary (Laurence & Margolis, 1999; Hupcey & Penrod, 2005).

Personal and professional life-context

The everyday personal and professional lives of distance learners that comprise three spheres: their personal life involving their immediate and extended family members, their friends and acquaintances and their wider community connections; their professional life involving their work colleagues, managers and organisational leaders as well as their wider network of peers and professional or industry associates; and their broader community setting encompassing their locality, culture, religion and socio-economic context.

Phenomenon

Any occurrence that can be observed, sensed or experienced.

Postgraduate coursework

Formal accredited study above the level of undergraduate that is undertaken by predominantly completing set learning and assessment activities rather than by carrying out substantive original research.

Post-experience postgraduate coursework learners

Mid-career professionals who enrol in postgraduate coursework programs some years after completing their undergraduate degree as a means of updating their existing skills and knowledge, changing careers or improving their capacity to perform new roles for which they feel unqualified or unprepared (James & Beattie, 1996; Duke, 1997; Kember, Ho & Leung, 2014; Mellors-Bourne, Hooley & Marriott, 2014).

Pre-experience postgraduate coursework learners

University graduates who enrol in postgraduate coursework programs soon after completing their undergraduate degree in order to gain a competitive advantage in the job market by completing a non-research postgraduate qualification that will provide them with
specialist professional knowledge and skills and distinguish them from the masses of others who now hold similar undergraduate qualifications (Duke, 1997; Tight, 2012, p. 92; Kember, Ho & Leung, 2014; Mellors-Bourne, Hooley & Marriott, 2014).

**Program**

A specified collection of units that make up a qualification.

**Unit**

A course of study, usually completed over a limited time period, that is part of a larger program of study.
Abstract

This thesis conceptualises and explores the occurrence and learning contributions of life-context interactions — those interactions that take place between distance learners and a variety of people in their everyday lives about the academic content of their studies. Within the distance education literature, interaction has been the topic of much discussion as distance educators have explored the different types of interactions possible and the role and relative importance of each in the learning process. During the past 25 years a number of eminent researchers have contributed to the development of conceptual models of these modes of interaction. To date, however, only one model has made reference to interactions between distance learners and people in their broader lives, and even then such interactions have not been defined or explained in any depth.

Where once it may have been reasonable to assume that the everyday lives of distance learners were unlikely to include many people with whom they could discuss the academic content of their studies, the changing nature of the distance education student population in nations such as Australia means this is no longer the case, as large numbers of working professionals now complete postgraduate coursework programs for career-related reasons and seek to find links between their learning and their work.

Using the interpretative phenomenological analysis research approach (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) and a concept development theoretical framework (Walker & Avant, 2011), this thesis addresses this situation by exploring distance learners’ life-context interactions from the perspective of fourteen working professionals completing postgraduate coursework programs delivered by two Australian higher education institutions. Drawing upon a thematic analysis of interview data, the thesis discusses the five different forms these interactions take and the factors that either promoted or inhibited participants’ engagement in them. It also uses a reconfigured version of Fink’s taxonomy of significant learning (2003) to identify the learning contributions made by these interactions, which most notably include integrating academic and non-academic knowledge and practices. The thesis concludes with a discussion of the implications of these findings for distance education theories, models and design. It proposes a more holistic way of conceptualising learning in distance education, an alternative model of the learner interaction modes that contribute to learning in distance education programs, and a new approach to distance education.
education program design that draws upon people and resources both within and beyond the learning context.
Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Overview of the study

This study conceptualises the overlooked phenomenon of distance learners’ life-context interactions, which have been accorded little attention in distance education theories and models of interaction. Across three phases, it uses a concept development theoretical framework and an interpretative phenomenological analysis research approach to propose the use of a standard disciplinary term for this phenomenon and to explore its occurrence and learning contributions from the perspective of fourteen distance learners undertaking postgraduate coursework programs. The findings from this study show that participants engaged in five different types of life-context interactions that contributed to their learning in a variety of ways that accorded with the categories of learning set out in a reconfigured version of Fink’s (2003) taxonomy of significant learning. Chief amongst these learning contributions was the development of participants’ integration skills, particularly in relation to connecting the academic content of their study program with relevant knowledge and practices in their professional life-contexts. The study also found that participants varied considerably in the extent to which they engaged in life-context interactions and identified four key factors that influenced their level of engagement. Drawing on these findings, this study concludes with a discussion of the implications for distance education theories, models and design. It proposes a more holistic way of conceptualising learning in distance education, an alternative model of the learner interaction modes that contribute to learning in distance education programs, and a new approach to distance education program design that draws upon people and resources both within and beyond the learning context.

1.2 Impetus for the study

Research in the field of education often arises from an experience in the world that directs a researcher’s attention to a particular topic of inquiry (Carson, 1986). In much this way, the impetus for this thesis dates back to a “disorienting dilemma” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 168) that I experienced while undertaking a Postgraduate Certificate in Online Education by online distance education between 2007 and 2008. As part of the program I completed units that were designed to require interdependent study involving considerable online interaction and collaboration between learners. At the time I was working as an educational
designer on a distance education Master of Business Administration (MBA) program, but had not been exposed to the learning theory of social constructivism that underpinned the design framework of the units I was studying. I had, however, been an active member of an online community for many years but had chosen to leave it because I felt that my ‘virtual life’ was consuming too much of my time and energy and was having a detrimental effect on my real life. Given this context, I had mixed feelings when I realised the extent of online interaction some of the units in the program demanded, but decided to set these aside and participate fully in the learning experience. In doing so, I unwittingly embarked on a journey that challenged my perspective regarding the role of interpersonal interaction in the distance learning process, but also raised more questions than answers.

The central dilemma I found myself confronted with was that on the one hand, the unit designs demonstrated not only the feasibility of incorporating group learning activities into distance education courses, but also the way in which this could facilitate the creation of strong and often vibrant learning communities, the likes of which I had never seen in the distance education courses I had worked on. On the other hand, the requirement for extensive interaction and collaboration with other learners made the units extraordinarily time-consuming and sometimes impeded my ability to cognitively engage with content, to ponder and reflect upon new ideas, and to balance the demands of my studies with my work, family and other commitments. As I struggled to cope with states of ‘time tension’ and ‘time tyranny’ (Scott, 2007, p. 77) and to maintain my connection to those near while interacting with those far away (Mejias, 2005), I began reflecting upon the time and emotional effort involved in being an active participant in a well-functioning online community, the differences between permanent interest-based communities and temporary learning communities, and the relative contributions of real life and online relationships to my life and my studies. More than once I found myself wondering what on earth the engineers and other professionals enrolled in the distance education MBA program I worked on would make of such designs.

In an attempt to explore this issue I conducted a research project as part of my Master of Education that investigated the attitudes of learners enrolled in the MBA program towards interacting with other learners. The results revealed that my concerns were well-founded and highlighted a complex interplay between the life-contexts of these learners and their studies (Watson, 2009; Watson, 2010). The associated literature search also revealed that
some learners in other programs reported similar experiences to my own (Hatch, 2002; Motteram & Forrester, 2005; Su, Bonk, Majjuka, Liu & Lee, 2005; Ke & Carr-Chellman, 2006). When I initially decided to pursue a PhD it seemed natural to build on the results of this project and explore the interpersonal interaction preferences of a much wider range of postgraduate distance learners. However, in the process of preparing my research proposal, three things struck me that will be discussed in greater depth in Chapters 4 and 5: there is no agreed term in the literature for the concept of distance learners’ ‘life-contexts’; there are relatively few studies that explore the different ways these life-contexts might contribute to learning; and the dominant model of modes of interaction in distance education does not currently recognise the interactions distance learners may have with other people in their life-contexts about the academic content of their studies.

As each of these observations nigged away at me I found myself inescapably drawn to exploring them further. They spoke to my professional commitment to design programs that meet the lifelong learning needs of adults in ways that are not only educationally sound, but also respect their independence and autonomy and the complexity of their existing lives. My commitment comes not from a consumerist perspective of learners as clients, but rather from a humanist perspective of learners as persons (Pring, 2004, p. 18) with individual thoughts, dispositions and life-contexts that must be respected. This places me within the tradition of distance education researchers such as Grace (1991), Evans (1994), Eastmond (1995) and Gibson (1998) who have investigated various dimensions of the interrelationships between distance learners’ studies and their lives, sometimes from an explicitly humanist stance. In the end, it felt like the topic had chosen me, and I felt compelled to pursue it and find out what it revealed.

1.3 Problem statement

In distance education, as in education more generally, interaction is widely considered to be an important part of the learning process. Within the distance education literature it has been the topic of much discussion as distance educators have explored the different types of interactions possible and the role and relative importance of each in the learning process. During the past 25 years a number of eminent researchers have contributed to the development of conceptual models of these modes of interaction, most notably Moore (1989), Anderson and Garrison (1998), Anderson (2003a; 2003b), Anderson and Kuskis
(2007) and Ally (2008). To date, however, only Ally’s model has made reference to interactions between distance learners and elements of their broader contexts, and even then such interactions have not been defined or explained in any depth.

Over the years both Garrison (1993) and Anderson (2003b) have acknowledged the possibility that distance learners may be interacting with other people in their everyday lives about their studies in a way that is making a positive contribution to their learning. Garrison further suggested that at some point it might be worth investigating these interactions and perhaps incorporating them into the model of modes of interaction. However, his suggestion has never been acted upon, and Anderson (2003b) more recently argued that such interactions were very complex and idiosyncratic and so beyond the scope of his attention. In consequence, while a solid body of research has been built around distance learners’ interactions with each other, their teachers and the academic content of the programs they study (for a summary see Friesen & Kuskis, 2013), very little research seems to have been undertaken into their interactions with other people in their lives about the academic content of their studies. The phenomenon itself has also never been formally labelled or defined, which has the effect of restricting discourse on the topic by making it hard to find the language with which to articulate thoughts and ideas.

In times past, this inattention may have seemed reasonable given that the distance education student population in advanced industrialised nations such as Australia tended to be dominated by mature-age undergraduate learners (Anwyl, Powles & Patrick, 1987; Calvert, 2005) whose everyday lives may have been thought unlikely to include many people with whom they could discuss the academic content of their studies. However, over the past 25 years this situation has gradually changed as large numbers of working professionals have enrolled in postgraduate coursework programs in Australia and in many other countries (Department of Education, 2014a; Morgan, 2014) as a means of updating their existing skills and knowledge, changing careers or improving their capacity to perform new roles for which they feel unqualified or unprepared (James & Beattie, 1996; Duke, 1997; Kember, Ho & Leung, 2014; Mellors-Bourne, Hooley & Marriott, 2014). Approximately one-third of those in Australia choose to study by distance education (Department of Education, 2014c), and as working professionals who are studying for job-related reasons, these learners tend to perceive work and learning as interconnected (James & Beattie, 1996; Duke, 1997; Forsyth et al., 2009). It is therefore possible that they
are interacting with their colleagues about their studies as they seek to find links between their learning and their work, particularly if their program includes authentic learning and assessment tasks that encourage them to do so. It thus seems like an opportune time to explore the interactions they may be having with various people in their lives about the academic content of their studies and to reconsider whether such interactions warrant being considered as a mode of interaction in distance education.

1.4 Study purpose and questions

The purpose of this study is to develop a conceptual understanding of the occurrence and potential learning contributions of the interactions that occur between working professionals who are enrolled in postgraduate coursework distance education programs and a variety of people in their everyday lives about the academic content of their studies.

This study is guided by the following questions:

1. What might be an appropriate conceptual label and definition for the interactions between distance learners and a variety of people in their everyday lives about the academic content of their studies?

2. What evidence can be found to verify and explain the occurrence of these interactions amongst working professionals who are studying Australian postgraduate coursework programs by distance education?

3. How do these learners perceive that any such interactions contribute to their learning?

4. How do these perceived learning contributions correspond with established learning theories and taxonomies?

5. What are the implications of the findings of this study for concept verification and utility, and for distance education theories, models and design?

1.5 Significance and contribution to knowledge

This study contributes to the macro-level distance education research area of ‘Theories and models’ as well as the micro-level research area of ‘Interaction and communication in learning communities’ as described by Zawacki-Richter (2009). It draws attention to the overlooked phenomenon of the interactions between distance learners and other people in
their personal and professional lives about their studies and proposes that the term ‘life-context interactions’ be adopted to describe it. In the process it also proposes that the phrase ‘personal and professional life-context’ and its shorter derivatives be adopted as the standard disciplinary term to describe the everyday personal and professional lives of distance learners.

This study provides evidence of the occurrence and learning contributions of life-context interactions amongst working professionals enrolled in a range of postgraduate coursework distance education programs delivered by Australian higher education institutions. In doing so it adapts and reconfigures Fink’s taxonomy of significant learning (Fink, 2003) to make it more denotative and balanced and thus easier for educationalists to use. The study shows how life-context interactions contributed to participants’ learning in ways that could not necessarily have been gained from interacting with their lecturers or the other learners in their programs, because they provide a qualitatively different type of interaction and have a unique capacity to assist them in connecting academic theory and knowledge with their professional and broader practices and concerns. As a result this study challenges aspects of the discourse surrounding theories and models of interaction in distance education, which currently sidelines discussion of those interactions that occur beyond the bounds of the formal learning context. It proposes a new and more holistic way of conceptualising learning in distance education based on Mejias’ (2005) notion of a pedagogy that validates nearness, along with a new connected learning approach to distance education design that draws upon the work of Kazmer (2005; 2007), as well as an alternative model of the learner interaction modes that contribute to learning.

This study also makes a methodological contribution to concept development, a theoretical framework commonly used in nursing but less so in other fields. Using the ‘concept synthesis’ strategy outlined by Walker and Avant (2011) as a starting point, this study makes a series of philosophical and procedural changes and innovations to advance and improve this under-utilised strategy, which has received relatively little attention in the literature despite facilitating the development of new and emergent concepts, which Rodgers (2000a) suggests may be concept development’s most enduring contribution.
### 1.6 Thesis structure

Beyond this introductory chapter, this thesis is divided into a further nine chapters:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 2: Background Context</th>
<th>Places this study in its broader context by discussing the literature surrounding the growing number of postgraduate coursework learners, particularly those that are studying by distance education.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Research Methodology and Design</td>
<td>Explains the research methodology and design used in this study, including the theoretical framework and underpinning philosophy, the research approach, methods and procedures used to collect data, and the procedures that guided how the data was analysed, interpreted and presented.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: Conceptualising 'Life-Context Interactions'</td>
<td>Addresses the first research question by describing three of the four activities undertaken during the conceptualisation phase of this project: noticing and giving attention to the overlooked disciplinary phenomenon of distance learners' life-context interactions, labelling the phenomenon and developing a working definition for it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: Locating the Concept in the Literature</td>
<td>Concludes the conceptualisation phase and provides a preliminary response to the fifth research question by locating the concept of life-context interactions in the literature and exploring how its development through this study might contribute to the development of disciplinary research, theory and practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6: Establishing the Exploratory Research Context</td>
<td>Provides an introduction to the exploration phase of this study by introducing each of the research participants and briefly outlining the postgraduate coursework programs in which they were enrolled.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 7: Exploring the Occurrence of Life-Context Interactions</td>
<td>Addresses the second research question by presenting findings from the exploration phase of this study regarding the extent to which participants engaged in life-context interactions and the factors that influenced their level of engagement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 8: Exploring the Learning Contributions of Life-Context Interactions</td>
<td>Addresses the third and fourth research questions by presenting findings from the exploration phase of this study regarding the learning contributions of life-context interactions based on the perceptions and experiences of participants and the categories of learning set out in a reconfigured version of Fink’s taxonomy of significant learning (2003).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integration Phase</td>
<td>Chapter 9: Implications for Distance Education</td>
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<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Integration Phase</td>
<td>Chapter 10: Conclusion</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 2: Background Context

For several decades one of the most significant trends in postgraduate education in Australia has been the rise of professionally-oriented coursework programs that attract mid-career professionals seeking to update their knowledge and skills and to progress, reorient or reinvent their careers. Some of these learners choose to study by distance education because its flexibility enables them to fit their studies around their personal and professional commitments rather than vice versa. This has gradually changed the nature of the distance education student population, which was once dominated by people enrolled in undergraduate programs who were either upgrading sub-degree qualifications or taking advantage of a ‘second chance’ to gain a university education. The following sections provide an overview of these trends and their significance for this study.

2.1 The rise of postgraduate coursework education

Postgraduate coursework education is advanced study that is undertaken by predominantly completing set learning and assessment activities rather than by carrying out substantive original research. Postgraduate coursework diploma programs have been delivered in Australia since the 1950s, with coursework masters programs introduced a few decades later in the 1970s when tuition fees were abolished and higher education was made available free of charge (Smith, 1979; McInnis, James & Morris, 1995). After a period of steady growth, postgraduate coursework enrolments have increased exponentially since the reintroduction of fees in 1989, which is thought to have encouraged providers to gain additional revenue by increasing their postgraduate student numbers through diversified coursework offerings that met market needs (McInnis et al., 1995; James & Beattie, 1996; Forsyth et al., 2009). Table 2.1 shows how between 1988 and 2013, total enrolments skyrocketed from a little under 50,000 to more than a quarter of a million (Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 2001; Department of Education, 2014b). Postgraduate coursework students now make up approximately 21% of all higher education students, compared with about 11% in 1988 (Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 2001; Department of Education, 2014b). By contrast, postgraduate research students who continue to receive their tuition free of charge still only number slightly more than 60,000 and account for less than 5% of all higher education enrolments (Department of Education, 2014b).
### Table 2.1: Postgraduate coursework enrolments in Australia, 1979–2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program Type</th>
<th>1979</th>
<th>1988</th>
<th>2013</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preliminary postgraduate qualification</td>
<td>1,360</td>
<td>1,643</td>
<td>380</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate certificate / postgraduate diploma</td>
<td>21,561</td>
<td>31,501</td>
<td>77,439</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters (coursework / extended)</td>
<td>8,746</td>
<td>14,936</td>
<td>205,674</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctorate (coursework)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1,105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total enrolments</strong></td>
<td>31,667</td>
<td>48,080</td>
<td>283,136</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Sources: Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 2001; Department of Education, 2014b.)

The rise of postgraduate coursework education owes much to several socio-environmental forces that are at play both locally and internationally: the emergence of lifelong learning as a practical necessity; the related massification of higher education; and the changing needs of the professions in the context of the information and technology revolution (McInnis et al., 1995; James & Beattie, 1996; Duke, 1997; Forsyth et al., 2009). Recent and future growth is additionally being influenced by changes made to the delivery of higher education at the University of Melbourne and the University of Western Australia, where undergraduate students now complete a generalist degree and then specialise through a postgraduate qualification (Group of Eight Australia, 2014) in line with the structure adopted by European universities as part of the Bologna process. These trends are expected to continue for at least the next fifteen years, with projections suggesting that the current rate of growth in postgraduate coursework enrolments will be maintained and may even accelerate (Group of Eight Australia, 2014). Similar trends have been noted in other advanced industrial nations, including Canada where these programs are referred to as ‘professional degrees’ (Bertrand, 2006), the United States where they are referred to as ‘practice-oriented Masters’ (National Centre for Education Statistics, 2013), Israel where they are known as ‘theoretical graduate programs’ (Davidovitch, Sinuany-Stern & Iram, 2012) and the United Kingdom where they are referred to as ‘taught postgraduate degrees’ (House, 2010; HEFCE, 2013) but where enrolments have declined slightly in the past couple of years for reasons not yet understood. These trends are also starting to occur in newly industrialised countries such as Malaysia (Kaur & Sidhu, 2009).
2.2 Lifelong learning, mass higher education and the professions

For much of the 20th century, education was tacitly conceptualised as a linear process of limited duration that was undertaken intensively during childhood and adolescence and rarely extended beyond early adulthood (Janne & Roggemans, 1971; Faure, 1972). While a small proportion of people in industrialised nations returned to education as adults, they were exceptions rather than the norm and were barely acknowledged by educational theorists (Knowles, 1973). The implicit expectation was that most individuals would leave the formal education system having acquired all the knowledge and skills necessary for their adult lives (Faure, 1972).

Although a few far-sighted academics challenged these notions (see for example Smith, 1919; Yeaxlee, 1929; Jacks, 1946; Adler, 1952; Mead, 1958), their calls went largely unheeded until the 1970s when it became increasingly apparent that the pace of societal change had accelerated dramatically and concepts and knowledge acquired in youth were being made obsolete well within an individual’s lifetime (Knowles, 1970). In response to this, reports commissioned by UNESCO (Janne & Roggemans, 1971; Faure, 1972), the OECD (OECD, 1971; Kallen & Bengtsson, 1973) and the Council of Europe (Jessup, 1973) began arguing the case for ‘recurrent’, ‘permanente’ or ‘lifelong’ education that bridged the divide between education and work and provided adults with the opportunity to periodically return to full-time study across their lifespan.

While these reports inspired a great deal of discussion and research worldwide (Cropley, 1979) and were influential in shaping the nascent vocational education system in Australia (Ryan, 1999), their real impact was not felt until the mid-1990s when some of the core ideas they espoused were revisited in a ‘second thoughts’ phase of development foreshadowed by Cropley (1979) and driven by the impact of globalisation and the emerging knowledge-based economy (OECD, 1996). In this rapidly changing context, a stream of new reports were commissioned by international bodies such as the Commission of the European Communities (1995), UNESCO (Delors, 1996) and the OECD (Tuinman, 1996) as well as the governments of many countries including Australia (Candy, Crebert & O’Leary, 1994; West, 1998). Where the earlier reports had presented ongoing education as a desirable utopia linked predominantly to the achievement of human fulfilment, these
newer reports presented it more pragmatically as a ‘necessary utopia’ (Delors, 1996) linked intrinsically to social and economic participation in the 21st century (Tuijnman, 1996) as well as peace, prosperity and personal fulfilment (Delors, 1996). Acknowledging that globalisation and technological change were transforming work patterns and employment opportunities in industrialised countries, these reports argued there was a need to create better educated ‘learning societies’ with the capacity to continually learn and change (Candy et al., 1994; Commission of the European Communities, 1995; OECD, 1996; West, 1998). They therefore supported the concept of ‘lifelong learning’ in which formal and informal educational activities would be undertaken by all people across the lifespan in conjunction with work or other pursuits (Tuijnman, 1996). They also validated the need for undergraduate higher education to continue its transition from an ‘elite’ system to a ‘mass’ system (Trow, 1973) and suggested further measures to facilitate this trend.

The content of these reports both reflected and contributed to a broader change in the social discourse surrounding education. Further education beyond secondary school is now considered necessary for most people in advanced industrialised nations and has become a mandatory requirement for entry into a wide range of skilled occupations and professions (Higher Education Council, 1996; Leitch, 2006; Bradley, 2008). Periodic updating of qualifications and skills is also increasingly presented as a necessity, rather than as an option, and is even mandated by some professions as the information and technology revolution renders some knowledge obsolete or out-dated and facilitates the creation of entirely new occupations and professions (Candy et al., 1994; Higher Education Council, 1996). Younger generations tend to have pragmatically accepted this reality and embraced lifelong learning as a means of periodically progressing, reorienting or reinventing their careers and self-identities (Illeris, 2003; 2009). The professions, too, have seized upon lifelong learning as a means of helping them cope with the information revolution and equip their people for new roles and challenges. Sometimes they have achieved this through informal professional development programs, but other times they have accessed or facilitated the development of postgraduate coursework programs that meet their emerging needs (McInnis et al., 1995; James & Beattie, 1996; Jarvis, 2000; 2007; Forsyth et al., 2009). This changed perception of the role of education in society has created a demand for a much wider array of postgraduate coursework programs than was available several decades ago. Many of these programs are oriented towards the
professions, with business accounting for more than a third of all postgraduate coursework enrolments in Australia in 2013 and the fields of education and health also featuring prominently (Department of Education, 2014b). It has also diversified the range of people who are enrolling in postgraduate programs and has led to the emergence of two distinct types of postgraduate coursework learners with particular characteristics and needs.

2.3 The emergent postgraduate coursework learners

As the number of people with undergraduate qualifications has grown, and as the professions have increasingly sought to use higher education as a means of coping with the effects of the information revolution, two different types of postgraduate coursework learners have emerged: ‘pre-experience’ or ‘continuing’ university graduates and ‘post-experience’ or ‘returning’ mid-career professionals (Duke, 1997; Mellors-Bourne, Hooley & Marriott, 2014). The pre-experience university graduates tend to be aged mostly in their 20s and are seeking to gain entry into the job market by completing a professionally-oriented postgraduate qualification that will either grant them access to their chosen profession or will distinguish them from the masses of others who now hold similar undergraduate qualifications (Duke, 1997; Stuart, Lido, Morgan, Solomon & Akroyd, 2008; Tight, 2012, p. 92). While many are involved in paid work, they lack full-time work experience in their field of interest and tend to begin their postgraduate studies full-time during the academic year following the completion of a more theoretically-oriented undergraduate degree (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2014; Kember, Ho & Leung, 2014). In Australia these students currently comprise about 55% of all postgraduate coursework enrolments (Department of Education, 2014a) and their numbers may be expected to increase as some universities embrace what Kember et al. (2014, p. 5) describe as the ‘extended two-part initial education model’ in which students initially complete a generalist undergraduate degree aimed at developing their generic graduate attributes and subsequently complete a specialist postgraduate qualification aimed at developing their professional knowledge and skills (Group of Eight Australia, 2014; Kember et al., 2014). In contrast, the post-experience mid-career professionals tend to be aged mostly in their 30s and 40s and are seeking to update their existing skills and knowledge, change careers or improve their capacity to perform new roles for which they feel unqualified or unprepared (James & Beattie, 1996; Duke, 1997; Kember et al., 2014; Mellors-Bourne et al., 2014). They tend to be ‘earner-learners’ who study part-time while working full-time and usually
begin their postgraduate qualification some years after completing their undergraduate degree as a form of continuing professional development (Kember et al., 2014; Mellors-Bourne et al., 2014). In Australia these students currently comprise about 45% of all postgraduate coursework enrolments (Department of Education, 2014a), a proportion that has slowly but steadily decreased over the past decade as growth in their numbers has been outpaced by growth in the numbers of pre-experience university graduates.

More than a quarter of all postgraduate coursework learners in Australia study by some form of distance education (Department of Education, 2014c), and it is these learners that are the specific focus of this study. While it is difficult to determine from publicly available statistics what proportion are pre-experience university graduates and what proportion are post-experience professionals, it seems likely that most fall into the latter category since more than 80% are studying part-time (Department of Education, 2014c) which is consistent with the profile of post-time professionals. By comparison, nearly 60% of those studying internally on-campus or by a combination of modes are doing so full-time (Department of Education, 2014c), which suggests they probably comprise more pre-experience university graduates than post-experience professionals. Amongst those postgraduate coursework learners studying externally, 60% are women as compared with 55% in the total postgraduate coursework population, figures that have each increased over the past several decades (Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 2001; Department of Education, 2014c). Only 7% are international students in comparison with one-third of the general postgraduate coursework population, with internal university data suggesting that international students are more likely to be pre-experience university graduates rather than post-experience professionals (Kiley & Cumming 2014) and overwhelmingly choose to study internally on-campus (Department of Education, 2014c).

Until quite recently, postgraduate coursework learners have attracted only limited attention in the research literature, despite repeated calls for further investigation into their characteristics, experiences and learning and teaching needs (Coulthard, 2000; Reid, Rennie & Shortland-Jones, 2005; Cluett & Skene, 2006; Edwards, 2011). Kiley & Cumming (2014, p. 99) refer to them as the “silent majority of postgraduate education”, with studies tending to focus instead on the much smaller number of postgraduate research students. The implicit assumption appears to have been that even though postgraduate coursework
learners have contributed significant income to higher education institutions, they are less deserving of attention than their research counterparts and not sufficiently different to undergraduate students to warrant separate investigation (Knight, 1997a; Reid et al., 2005; Cluett & Skene, 2006). A good number of those studies undertaken both locally and internationally have thus tended to reflect the concerns of policy makers and administrators regarding enrolment trends and policy implications (for example, Taylor, 2002; Bertrand, 2006; Boorman & Ramsden, 2008; House, 2010; HEFCE, 2013) or quality assurance mechanisms and challenges (for example, McInnis et al., 1995; James & McInnis, 1997; Knight, 1997a; Atkins & Redley, 1998) rather than the interests or experiences of teaching staff or the learners themselves.

Recently this has begun to change and a substantial body of work has emerged regarding postgraduate coursework learners' needs and experiences. These studies show how, in common with their postgraduate research peers, many of these learners have much more complicated life-contexts than their undergraduate counterparts. This is something that is not always acknowledged in pedagogic practice and yet has been shown to substantially influence their choice of program and institution as well as their transition to postgraduate study (Tobbell, O’Donnell & Zammitt, 2010; Mellors-Bourne et al., 2014). While some pre-experience university graduates remain with their alma mater and simply continue on with their undergraduate lifestyle (Bowman, 2005), most post-experience professionals have job roles and family responsibilities that place pragmatic monetary and attendance constraints on their choice of course, institution and study mode as well as demands on their time that must be negotiated and juggled throughout their studies (Tobbell et al., 2010; Ladyshewsky & Taplin, 2013; Mellors-Bourne et al., 2014). They may value the opportunity to network and share their study experience with fellow students, but regardless of their study mode they tend to socialise with them less than the typical undergraduate and seek temporary connections rather than lasting friendships, having already established a social circle (Herrington, Sparrow & Herrington, 2000; Cluett & Skene, 2006; Mackey, 2010). This contributes to their tendency to lack a sense of group identity (Cluett & Skene, 2006), something that is compounded by the flexible structure of many postgraduate coursework programs which often do not require students to move through as a cohort (Todhunter, 2009). Aspects of their personal and professional lives, however, may also enhance their
engagement in postgraduate study, something that both Tight (2012, p. 103) and Tobbell et al. (2010) suggest might benefit from further research.

While the life-contexts of post-experience professionals might differ significantly from those of their undergraduate counterparts, their study skills needs in returning to study are remarkably similar. Having completed their undergraduate degree some years earlier, or having gained entry to a postgraduate coursework program without an undergraduate qualification through an alternative pathway, they are sometimes unfamiliar with modern academic libraries, lack information literacy skills and are unused to using the online environment as a primary or supplementary mode of study (Symons, 2001; Wozniak, Mahony, Lever & Pizzica, 2009; Stagg & Kimmins, 2014). They are also unsure of the academic standard they are expected to achieve, they sometimes have weaker academic writing skills than their postgraduate research peers (Symons, 2001), and in common with the latter group they often struggle with the increased level of emphasis placed on independent learning and study (Tobbell et al., 2010). Furthermore, competing demands in their life-contexts and the short durations of their study programs mean they are less likely to invest significant time in participating in orientation programs or study groups (Lang, 2002; Cluett & Skene, 2006; Wozniak et al., 2009; Thomas, Day & Hegarty, 2014). They therefore benefit from being offered orientation and study skills programs that are tailored to meet their needs (Symons, 2001; Lang, 2002; Wozniak et al., 2009; Stagg & Kimmins, 2014).

The career-oriented focus of postgraduate coursework learners means they tend to prefer curricula that develop their specialist professional knowledge by linking theory to practice and can be critical if they perceive a program to be too theoretical (Garner & Wallace, 1997; Todhunter, 2009; Thomas et al., 2014). This is particularly so for the post-experience professionals who are already immersed in their careers and tend to have active work-related issues and concerns that they are hoping their program will shed light on (Knight, 1997b; Todhunter, 2013), along with consumerist expectations of quality and value for money and a greater willingness than their undergraduate counterparts to make their complaints known (Gardner & Wallace, 1997; Cluett & Skene, 2006). The post-experience professionals can also sometimes express a dislike for interdependent learning and assessment methods such as collaborative group-work, perhaps because of the challenges involved in coordinating their busy schedules (Thomas et al., 2014). This can
put them at odds with academic staff who may deliberately incorporate such methods into the design of postgraduate coursework programs because of the pedagogic benefits they have been shown to deliver (Knight, 1997b; Todhunter, 2009; Thomas et al., 2014). While these things can increase the level of challenge involved in designing and delivering postgraduate coursework programs, they are not insurmountable. This is demonstrated by the best practice principles and conceptual frameworks developed by Reid et al. (2005) and Todhunter (2009; 2013), along with the innovative approaches adopted by practitioners such as Herrington et al. (2000) and Dickie and Jay (2010), which are reflective of Knight’s advice (1997a; 1997b) regarding the need to treat postgraduate coursework learners as a distinct group and attend to their particular needs. The results of the 2010 Australasian Postgraduate Survey of Student Engagement (POSSE) suggest that practitioners are not unaware of this, with learners reporting higher levels of work integrated learning than their undergraduate peers and blending their learning more with their workplace experiences (Edwards, 2011), each of which point to the likelihood that practitioners may well be designing postgraduate coursework programs differently to help facilitate these outcomes. The tendency to engage in work-integrated learning is particularly strong amongst external postgraduate coursework learners, which Edwards suggests indicates a tighter relationship between these learners’ work and studies. It is also consistent with the findings of Todhunter (2009; 2013) regarding the value of incorporating situated learning into the design of postgraduate coursework distance education programs. However, on all other scales of engagement, external postgraduate coursework learners show less involvement in activities that are empirically linked with high-quality learning than their on-campus counterparts (Edwards, 2011). More research is therefore needed to identify how learner-centred approaches might be used to better engage these learners. This study seeks to make a contribution in this regard.

2.4 The changing distance education student population

The growth in the numbers of postgraduate coursework learners over the past 25 years has gradually changed the nature of the distance education student population in Australia’s higher education sector. Historically, enrolment in higher education distance learning programs was restricted to those who met conventional entry standards but were unable to attend a university campus due to their geographical isolation (Johnson, 1983; Anwyl, Powles & Patrick, 1987). Until the 1970s, only a handful of tertiary institutions
delivered distance education by sending selected students pre-prepared written courses of instruction in the mail and in some instances requiring their attendance at short duration on-campus residential schools. The majority of distance learners were rural or remote teachers and educational administrators completing in-service undergraduate or postgraduate coursework programs in teaching or administration, with the remainder enrolled in a variety of other undergraduate, postgraduate and sub-degree qualifications (Smith, 1979; Johnson, 1983; Anwyl et al., 1987). During the 1970s, however, the rules regarding enrolments were relaxed, university fees were abolished and a number of new institutions were established, including Deakin University which commenced enrolments in 1977 with a mandate to provide both on-campus and off-campus study. As a consequence of these changes, a much larger range of tertiary institutions began targeting two additional student groups: adults who were seeking a ‘second chance’ to complete an undergraduate degree while continuing to work or look after a family; and working professionals and para-professionals who were seeking to update, upgrade or add to their existing qualifications (Johnson, 1983; Anwyl et al., 1987). For a proportion of both of these groups, distance education offered an attractive and more flexible alternative to on-campus studies. Enrolments subsequently grew significantly and the profile of distance learners changed rapidly, with undergraduates predominating, the proportion of both female and metropolitan learners increasing and a much wider range of occupations represented (Smith, 1979; Johnson, 1983; Anwyl et al., 1987).

These trends continued into the 1980s when a few institutions philosophically embraced the idea that a wider range of postgraduate coursework programs could be delivered by distance education and began offering new programs aimed at professionals and para-professionals (Bynner, 1986). These included the Master of Business Administration (MBA) developed by Deakin University, which was the first MBA in the world to be delivered by distance education and attracted more than 500 new enrolments each year (Holt, 1992; Zeegers, 2002), suggesting that Anwyl et al. (1987) had been right in speculating that there was an unmet demand for distance education postgraduate coursework programs. When the Australian federal government reintroduced and deregulated fees for postgraduate coursework programs in 1989, other universities followed this lead and a much larger number of postgraduate coursework programs began to be offered by distance education, (James & Beattie, 1996; Calvert, 2005). The subsequent rise of the internet and the
development of online delivery options served to amplify this trend, with even the most traditional on-campus institutions such as The University of Sydney delivering some of their postgraduate coursework programs wholly by online distance education (Forsyth, Pizzica, Laxton & Mahony, 2010).

The result has been a substantial increase in both the number and proportion of distance learners studying postgraduate coursework programs. While relevant statistics are difficult to access prior to 2001, data cited by Anwyl et al. (1987) suggest that this trend was already evident more than 30 years ago, with 74% of distance education students undertaking bachelor courses in 1984 compared with 86% in 1975, and 13% undertaking higher degrees compared with 5% in 1975. Figure 2.1 below shows that by 2001, the proportion of postgraduate coursework learners had risen to 34% of all distance learners and has since grown further still to 41% (Department of Education, 2014c). The sheer number of these learners has also grown from 46,785 in 2001 to 77,564 in 2013 (Department of Education, 2014c). Postgraduate coursework learners thus now constitute a significant proportion of mainstream distance learners in Australia, a situation that may well be replicated in other countries such as the United Kingdom and Canada given the presence of similar patterns and trends, albeit slightly more recently (Bynner, 1986; Guri-Rosenblit, 1999). These learners are therefore deserving of attention within the broader context of distance education research.

Figure 2.1: Proportion of Australian distance learners at each program level 2001–2013
(Source: Department of Education, 2014c)
Chapter 2: Background Context

2.5 Summary

Postgraduate coursework education in Australia has grown from a very small, niche area in the 1970s to become a substantial and financially important part of mainstream higher education in the 21st century. A number of factors have driven this change, including the rise of lifelong learning as a practical means of equipping both individuals and the professions to cope with the changes wrought by the information and technology revolution, and the shift to a mass system of higher education in which large numbers of young people complete undergraduate degrees and some subsequently enrol in specialist postgraduate coursework programs in order to help them gain entry to a profession. As a result, two distinct types of postgraduate coursework learners have emerged: pre-experience university graduates and post-experience mid-career professionals. A substantial proportion of the latter group choose to study by some form of distance education, and this has gradually transformed the nature of the distance education student population, which was once dominated by those enrolled in undergraduate programs but is now split much more evenly between undergraduates and postgraduate coursework learners.

Postgraduate coursework learners tend to be very career-oriented, and the post-experience learners that gravitate towards distance education programs typically have complicated personal and professional lives that can act to both limit and enhance their engagement in postgraduate study. While some examples can be found in the literature of innovative programs designed with these issues in mind, recent studies suggest that more research is needed to identify alternative learner-centred approaches that might help improve the engagement of these learners. This study seeks to make a contribution in this regard by exploring the occurrence and learning contributions of postgraduate distance learners’ life-context interactions and the ways in which these might be leveraged to enhance the design of postgraduate coursework programs. The next chapter describes the research methodology and design used to carry out this study.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology and Design

This chapter describes the research methodology and design used to undertake this study. It begins by explaining the concept development theoretical framework that has guided its overall conduct, along with the underpinning philosophical view of concepts, the chosen concept development strategy and the associated three-phase project design. It then describes the interpretative phenomenological analysis research approach and associated data collection methods and procedures used during the exploration phase, and the processes that guided how the data was analysed, interpreted and presented in the integration phase. This includes a discussion of Fink’s (2003) taxonomy of significant learning, which was used to better understand the learning contributions made by participants’ life-context interactions. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how the conduct of this study corresponds with principles of trustworthiness in qualitative research.

3.1 Concept development framework

The concept development theoretical framework is designed to support the formulation and refinement of disciplinary concepts — those phenomena that concern the scholars within a particular academic field who have given them agreed labels and highly specific meanings that are socially constructed with reference to disciplinary theory and may not be commonly understood by the general populace (Toulmin, 1972; Hupcey & Penrod, 2005). My decision to adopt the concept development framework happened part-way through this study when I came across it by chance and realised it offered a systematic way of approaching my study, which sought to develop a better understanding of a seemingly overlooked disciplinary concept. Until this point I had not thought of my study as concept development research, which Rodgers (2000a) suggests is common where new and emergent concepts are concerned, and had been using a research approach that was designed to support the exploration of ‘ordinary language’ concepts used in day-to-day language. By adopting the concept development framework I came to appreciate the need to choose an alternative approach more suited to the development of a disciplinary concept and was able to reshape my study in a way that increased its methodological congruence and overall coherence. This included drawing upon the work of those philosophers and scholars that address the development of disciplinary concepts, such as Toulmin (1972),
Sartori (1984) and Kuhn (1996), rather than those that address the analysis of ordinary language concepts, such as Wittgenstein (1953), Wilson (1963) and Ryle (1971).

The concept development theoretical framework is widely used in the field of nursing but less well known in other disciplines. It emerged in the early 1980s as part of a broader effort within nursing to develop a specialised knowledge base by reviewing, modifying and adding to the conceptual frameworks imported from other disciplines so that they better reflected the language, practices and values of the nursing profession (Weaver & Mitcham, 2008). The concept development framework is still maturing and evolving and currently comprises a range of different strategies developed by a variety of nursing scholars, some of which will be outlined in the next section. Many of these derive from a text written by school teacher John Wilson (1963) which describes a set of techniques for analysing concepts based on the ‘ordinary language’ wing of analytical philosophy, a movement that arose from the works of Wittgenstein (1953), Ryle (1971) and others in the 1960s and 1970s. Despite not being designed as a framework for academic research but rather as a means of teaching high school students how to analyse so-called ‘ordinary language’ concepts used in day-to-day language, Wilson’s techniques proved popular amongst nursing scholars as they sought to analyse, refine and add to the disciplinary concepts that formed the nursing knowledge base and theoretical frameworks. Reading his text today, it is not difficult to see why: in comparison to other similar texts written by analytical philosophers of education such as Green (1971) and Soltis (1978), Wilson’s text is remarkably clear and lucid and reveals both a razor-sharp mind and an ability to communicate philosophical thought in a way that is precise yet highly readable. Nevertheless, had it not been for the attention given to it by nursing scholars, use of this text and its techniques may well have remained limited to the realms of philosophical analysis, as seems to have been the case with the texts by Green and Soltis.

The major contribution of the nursing scholars has been to take Wilson’s techniques for the analysis of ordinary language concepts and to incorporate them into a much larger framework of strategies for the development of disciplinary concepts within the broader context of theory construction. It is difficult to find anything equivalent to this in the field of education, although Edel (1972) long ago suggested that the language of teaching and learning should be treated as a legitimate disciplinary language and subjected to more than ordinary language analysis. Pivotal in affecting this outcome in the field of nursing has
been the work of Lorraine Walker and Kay Avant (1983), whose seminal text *Strategies for theory construction in nursing* popularised Wilson’s techniques by using them as the basis for a strategy they termed ‘concept analysis’, one of nine strategies they proposed to support the construction of theory. Much of the discussion surrounding this text has centred on this one strategy, which is reflective of a broader tendency within nursing to over-utilise concept analysis (Rodgers, 2000a) and to use it as an end in itself rather than as part of a broader effort to contribute to disciplinary theory development (Rew et al., 2005). Yet as an outsider reading the latest edition of Walker and Avant’s text (2011), what is most striking is in fact not their concept analysis strategy at all, but rather the way in which they demystify the process of theory construction by first explicating the different elements involved and then describing a variety of approaches that can be taken along with some strategies for choosing among these.

A common weakness that pervades the concept development literature is a lack of attention given to the philosophical view of concepts that underpins each strategy and the consequences of these views for praxis (Rodgers, 2000c; Duncan, Cloutier & Bailey, 2007). However, a robust debate has gradually developed regarding the most appropriate theoretical perspective and ontological and epistemological positions that should underpin concept development strategies. A discussion of this is included in the next section of this chapter as part of my explication of the philosophical view of concepts I have adopted in this study.

### 3.2 Underpinning philosophical view of concepts

To engage in the development of a disciplinary concept is to engage with a question that has puzzled philosophers for centuries: what is a concept? There are many different philosophical and cognitive theories of concepts, including classical theories (for example Locke, 1690/1975; Frege, 1892/1966), neoclassical theories (for example Pinker, 1989; Jackendoff, 1983; 1989), prototype and exemplar theories (for example Wittgenstein, 1953; Rosch & Mervis, 1975; Smith & Medin, 1981), theory-theories (for example Carey, 1985; Gopnik & Meltzoff, 1997; Keil, 1989) and atomistic theories (for example Fodor, 1998). This thesis is underpinned by one of the two theory-theories of concepts that emerged from the field of psychology in the 1980s and 1990s and was influenced in part by the work of philosophers of science such as Thomas Kuhn (1962). Like many other theories of
concepts, theory-theories posit that concepts are structured mental representations. However, where other theories see concepts as being organised around similar sets of properties or features (Laurence & Margolis, 1999), theory-theories see them as being organised within and around theories, which provide them with meaning and coherence (Weiskopf, 2014). This makes theory-theories particularly suitable for the development of disciplinary concepts, which tend to have a direct relationship with disciplinary theory.

There are two different theory-theories: one known as the ‘concepts in theories’ view, which is advocated by Carey (1985), and the other known as the ‘concepts as theories’ view, which is advocated by Keil (1989). In the former, concepts are considered to be the constituent parts of theories and operate like theoretical terms; in the latter, concepts are considered to be miniature theories in themselves comprising explanations of their origins, their elements and their relationships with other concepts (Weiskopf, 2014). Both theory-theories reflect a contextualist epistemology in which concepts have a meaning that is contextualised and shaped by the theories with which they are associated. However, there is disagreement amongst nursing scholars engaged in concept development regarding the most appropriate accompanying ontological perspective, with some arguing for a moderately realist ontology in which concepts reflect a probable mind-independent truth (Hupcey & Penrod, 2005; Risjord, 2009a; 2009b), and others arguing for a relativist ontology in which concepts reflect a constructed reality (Duncan, Cloutier & Bailey, 2007; 2009).

This thesis is underpinned by the ‘concepts in theories’ view and reflects a relativist ontological perspective and a contextualist epistemology. From the earliest stages of this study, my development of the concept of life-context interactions was formulated in response to a potential gap I perceived in the dominant model of modes of interaction in distance education. In other words, the concept was always intended to sit within the broader context of an existing disciplinary theory, which is consistent with the principles and epistemology of the ‘concepts in theories’ view. My decision to adopt a relativist rather than a moderately realist ontological perspective reflects my acceptance of the position articulated by Toulmin (1972, p. 255) that the value of disciplinary concepts is not judged on the basis of realist notions such as probable truth or validity, but rather on the basis of relativist notions such as applicability and pragmatic utility. It also reflects my sympathy with the position of Duncan, Cloutier and Bailey (2009) that disciplinary concepts are
bound not only by their theoretical context but also the broader context within which they are intended to be used, and that even though this may reduce their universality it maximises their usability in those contexts. In this case, the development of the concept of life-context interactions presented in this thesis has occurred not only within the context of a specific disciplinary theory, but also within the broader context of postgraduate coursework distance education in the 21st century. In line with the advice of Sartori (1984), I have also given precedence to maximising its empirical usefulness rather than its theoretical fertility. This means that even though the general concept of life-context interactions may be applicable in other educational contexts beyond distance education, the specific conceptualisation of it presented here may not be because the nature and significance of the concept is likely to vary from one educational context to another. However, the conceptualisation is likely to have a greater level of utility within the specific context of distance education, and in the end this is of greater importance to me than striving to create a more universal but ultimately less usable concept.

3.3 Concept development strategy and design

 Scholars in the field of nursing have developed a range of different strategies for the development of disciplinary concepts, but many of these are implicitly designed for the development of established concepts making them unsuitable for use in this study. This includes the concept clarification strategy developed by Norris (1982), the evolutionary cycle of concept analysis developed by Rodgers (2000b), the feminist and critical approaches proposed by Wuest (1994; 2000), the strategy for creating conceptual meaning described by Chinn and Kramer (2011), and the simultaneous concept analysis strategy described by Haase, Leidy, Coward, Britt and Penn (2000). This last strategy has the additional disadvantage of being designed for the involvement of multiple researchers rather than an individual researcher working alone.

Of the five strategies developed by nursing scholars that are suitable for the development of emergent concepts, I discarded the concept identification strategy described by Morse (1995) because its shortcomings seemed to outweigh its benefits. Chief among these shortcomings is the fact that its procedures assume that emergent concepts arise as a by-product or outcome of a pre-existing qualitative study, which was not the case in this instance. Other shortcomings include the problematic philosophical view of concepts that
underpins this strategy and the limited level of guidance it offers regarding naming a concept and exploring the relationships between concepts and theories. I also discarded the concept exploration strategy described by Meleis (2012) because it was too limited in scope and did not extend to verifying the occurrence of a concept or exploring its ramifications for disciplinary theory, both of which I considered essential to this study given Saba’s (2013) demand that distance education concepts be empirically validated before being proposed for use in distance education theory. However, each of the other three strategies listed below seemed to have enough benefits to make them worth considering for this study, even though they also have various limitations or shortcomings.

- **Concept synthesis — Walker & Avant (2011)**
  This strategy is specifically designed for the development of emergent disciplinary concepts. It comprises a series of iterative steps that are described but not always named and include gathering and classifying data, naming the concept, verifying its occurrence through research and determining how the concept fits with disciplinary theory. However, the philosophical view of concepts that underpins this strategy is inadequately articulated, much criticised in the literature and appears to reflect a moderately realist ontological perspective, which is different to that adopted in this study. The steps involved in this strategy and the procedures for carrying them out are also vague and offer only limited guidance on how to name a concept and no discussion of how to utilise qualitative approaches other than grounded theory to undertake concept synthesis.

  This model is primarily designed for the development of established concepts, but it could be adapted for the development of emergent concepts. It comprises three overlapping phases — a theoretical phase, a fieldwork phase and an analytical phase. However, even though its fieldwork phase involves qualitative research, its processes assume this will involve participant observation rather than participant interviews, as was the case in this study. Its theoretical phase also makes no mention of methods for naming concepts and its analytical phase seems to place undue emphasis on measuring the frequency of a concept rather than exploring the potential linkages between concepts and theory.
• Integrated concept development — Meleis (2012)

This strategy describes a holistic process for developing concepts that offers a range of starting points depending on whether a concept is emergent or established. It comprises seven stages that can be undertaken sequentially, simultaneously or out of order: sensing and taking in a phenomenon; describing a phenomenon; labelling; concept development; statement development; explicating assumptions; and sharing and communicating. The stage related to noticing a phenomenon is unique to this strategy. The philosophical view of concepts that underpins this strategy is also based on a ‘concepts in theories’ view and appears to be contextualist, relativist and thus consistent with that adopted in this study. However, despite purporting to present the concept development process from beginning to end, the strategy does not explicitly discuss conducting qualitative research to verify the occurrence of a concept, and it does not link concepts to theory as well as Walker and Avant’s concept synthesis strategy.

In addition to the above strategies, a set of guidelines for naming and defining disciplinary concepts was identified that was developed by the social scientist Giovanni Sartori (1984) and offered a more rigorous approach to that aspect of this study than anything developed by the nursing scholars. Sartori’s guidelines, however, do not extend much beyond naming and defining concepts, which means they are more limited in their application than the various strategies developed by the nursing scholars.

Given the weaknesses inherent in each of the above options, I decided to heed the calls from Rodgers (2000a) and others for methodological innovation by selecting Walker and Avant’s concept synthesis strategy but enhancing it by adopting a different and more explicit philosophical view of concepts as described earlier in this chapter, and also drawing upon elements of the work of Sartori (1984), Schwartz-Barcott and Kim (1986; 2000) and Meleis (2012). The resulting design is depicted in Figure 3.1 on the following page and shows how the strategy addresses the study’s five research questions. It uses the structure of the three-phase model presented by Schwartz-Barcott and Kim (2000) to reflect the stages of this study and illustrate the iterative nature of the process. It then populates each phase with a set of activities that are primarily drawn from those described in Walker and Avant’s (2011) concept synthesis strategy, but also includes some taken from the works of Sartori (1984), Schwartz-Barcott & Kim (2000) and Meleis (2012).
The initial conceptualisation phase involves identifying an emergent disciplinary phenomenon, developing a conceptual label and working definition for the phenomenon and determining whether its potential disciplinary significance is enough to warrant further exploration and development. The subsequent exploration phase involves undertaking research to determine whether the occurrence of the concept could be verified by people who might be reasonably expected to have experience of it, and to develop a better understanding of the concept by exploring its significance for learning. The final integration phase involves exploring the findings of the study for concept verification and utility and integrating the emergent concept into the existing disciplinary knowledge base by exploring its implications for theory and practice and discussing what it might mean for future research.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology and Design

Conceptualisation Phase
- Notice a phenomenon
- Label the concept
- Develop a working definition
- Explore the potential disciplinary significance

Exploration Phase
- Prepare for data collection
- Collect data
- Analyse the data
- Describe the concept’s nature and significance

Integration Phase
- Explore implications for concept verification and utility
- Explore implications for distance education theory, models and design
- Identify future research directions

Research Questions
1. What might be an appropriate conceptual label and definition for the interactions between distance learners and a variety of people in their everyday lives about the academic content of their studies?
2. What evidence can be found to verify and explain the occurrence of these interactions amongst professionals who are studying Australian postgraduate coursework programs by distance education?
3. How do these learners perceive that any such interactions contribute to their learning?
4. How do these perceived learning contributions correspond with established learning theories and taxonomies?
5. What are the implications of the findings of this study for concept verification and utility, and for distance education theories, models and design?

Figure 3.1: Design of the concept synthesis strategy
3.4 Research approach

To undertake the research activities involved in the exploration phase of this study, a specific research approach was needed. Since a key purpose of this phase was to develop a better understanding of the occurrence and significance of the emergent concept of life-context interactions rather than to measure its incidence, a qualitative research approach was indicated. There are many different qualitative research approaches described in the literature, and the one chosen for the exploration phase of this study was interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith, 1996; Smith & Osborn, 2003; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). This section explains the rationale for this choice.

3.4.1 Choosing interpretative phenomenological analysis

Walker and Avant (2011) promote grounded theory as the default qualitative approach to use when engaging in concept synthesis. However, this proved impractical for this study because the emergent concept of life-context interactions did not arise as a by-product or outcome of a qualitative study or data set in a manner consistent with grounded theory, but rather through the identification of surprising silences and anomalies in the literature that suggested the possibility of an overlooked disciplinary phenomenon. Elsewhere in the concept development literature, the nursing scholars Morse, Hupcey, Mitcham and Lenz (1996) have reviewed a range of qualitative approaches and recommend the use of a phenomenological approach for studies involving the identification and exploration of emergent concepts. Unfortunately, they do not discuss the available variants, nor explain their differing strengths and limitations.

There are many different phenomenological research approaches including descriptive empirical phenomenology (Giorgi, 2009), experiential hermeneutic phenomenology (van Manen, 2011), lifeworld approaches (Dahlberg, Dahlberg & Nystrom, 2008; Ashworth, 2003; Seamon, 1979), interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith, 1996; Smith & Osborn, 2003; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009), dialogal phenomenology (Halling & Leifer, 1991), heuristic phenomenology (Moustakas, 1990) and relational-centred phenomenology (Finlay & Evans, 2009). Of these, descriptive empirical phenomenology was principally developed by the psychologist Amadeo Giorgi (2009) and centres on clarifying and describing the ‘essence’ or general meaning structures of a phenomenon. However, it
“does not go beyond the given” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 127) and thus does not permit the researcher to engage in any level of interpretation. This made it unsuitable for this study, which sought to go well beyond the given by developing interpretative descriptions of participants’ experiences and exploring the implications for distance education theory and practice. Experiential hermeneutic phenomenology based on the work of educationalist Max van Manen (2011) and the Utrecht School was the research approach initially chosen to guide this study prior to the adoption of the concept development framework. However, it proved to be a less than ideal choice because it focuses on the pre-reflective exploration of existing ‘ordinary language’ phenomena rather than the development of new disciplinary concepts and does not seek to move beyond interpretive description and explore implications for disciplinary theory and practice. Lifeworld approaches, dialogal phenomenology, heuristic phenomenology and relational-centred phenomenology are all variants of both descriptive empirical phenomenology and experiential hermeneutic phenomenology. They similarly do not seek to explore the linkages between phenomena and disciplinary theory and thus were judged unsuitable for this study.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), on the other hand, was developed by Jonathan Smith and others in the field of health psychology (Smith, 1996; Smith & Osborn, 2003; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) from a desire for a qualitative approach that was able to capture lived experience and engage with theory (Smith et al., 2009, p. 4). It has since been adopted in a range of other disciplines, including some areas of education (see for example Creanor, Trinder, Gowan & Howells, 2006; Mayes, 2006). IPA is based upon hermeneutic phenomenology but it diverges from other forms in two important ways: first, it is idiographic, which means it has a strong focus on investigating and communicating how individual research participants experience a particular phenomenon; and second, it requires researchers to go beyond interpretive description to investigate the links between the results of a study and extant disciplinary theory (Smith, 2004; Finlay, 2011). This latter feature meant it was more congruent with the study of emergent disciplinary concepts than any of the other phenomenological research approaches. Smith et al. (2009) advise that the main reason a researcher should choose IPA over other qualitative approaches is that it matches the epistemological position underpinning the study and associated research questions. The idiographic nature of IPA means that it is explicitly contextualist and focuses on exploring how particular phenomena are experienced by particular people in a
particular context (Smith et al., 2009, p. 29). This is consistent with the focus of this study, which seeks to explore how a particular type of interaction is experienced by a particular type of learner in a particular type of learning context. It is also consistent with my decision to adopt a contextualist epistemology as part of the philosophical view of concepts that underpins this study. For these reasons I decided to adopt it as the approach for the exploration phase of this study.

3.4.2 Working with interpretative phenomenological analysis

IPA is underpinned by a view of phenomenology as intrinsically interpretative or hermeneutic. Accepting Martin Heidegger’s (1962) dissection of the etymology of phenomenology as deriving from the Greek words *phenomenon*, meaning to ‘show’ or ‘appear’, and *logos*, meaning discourse, reason and judgement, Smith et al., (2009, pp. 23–25) draw upon his discussion of the way this ‘appearance’ generally involves both visible meanings that can be ascertained through perceptual activities, and hidden meanings that can only be uncovered through complementary interpretative or analytical activities. “So the phenomenon appears, but the phenomenologist can facilitate this, and then help to make sense of that appearing” (p. 24). In the case of this study, these two complementary activities can be seen in the way in which I first perceptually noticed the phenomenon of distance learners’ life-context interactions, before analytically labelling and defining the phenomenon and carrying out qualitative research to investigate its occurrence and significance. From the early stages of this study I thus perceived that there was, “…a phenomenon ready to shine forth, but detective work [was] required … to facilitate the coming forth, and then to make sense of it once it had happened” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 35). An important way in which IPA achieves this is by making use of the notion of the hermeneutic circle whereby the researcher moves cyclically between the part and the whole as they gather, analyse and interpret data. However, where other forms of hermeneutic phenomenology attempt to reconstruct lived experience in its own terms without recourse to theoretical perspectives, IPA instead attempts to develop a more complete understanding by reconstructing and critically engaging with accounts of lived experience and drawing upon disciplinary theory for further insights where the data invites this (Smith, 2004; Finlay, 2011).
IPA also draws upon the philosophical ideas of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre to emphasise our relational, situated and embodied relationship with the world. In doing so it embraces a perspective of human beings as ‘people-in-the world’ who are embedded in relationships, culture, language and concerns rather than disembodied “creatures in isolation” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 21) that are treated as “mere object[s] of biological, psychological or sociological investigation” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. ix). This is consistent with both my humanist view of learners as persons (Pring, 2004, p. 18) and my discomfort at the context-less and almost disembodied way in which distance learners are presented in some parts of the distance education literature, including in the dominant model of modes of interaction in distance education discussed in Chapter 5. Sartre’s (1956) notions of the importance of both presence and absence — ‘being and nothingness’ — are of particular importance in this regard because they emphasise the way in which people’s experiences are contingent upon their relationships with others.

3.5 Data collection methods and procedures

To gather data for this study using interpretative phenomenological analysis, an appropriate set of data collection methods and procedures were required. This section describes the overarching strategy used to guide the data collection process, along with the semi-structured interview method and the associated procedures used to implement it.

3.5.1 Data collection strategy and method

Researchers using IPA are encouraged to use semi-structured one-on-one interviews as their main data collection method because of their capacity to elicit rich, first-person accounts from participants about their experiences of the phenomenon under study (Smith et al., 2009, pp. 56–57). They are also advised to use a purposive sampling strategy as a means of selecting a small and relatively homogenous group of study participants who can offer particular perspectives of the phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009, pp. 48–49). For this study, approval was received from the Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee to conduct semi-structured interviews with fifteen working professionals who were each studying a vocationally-oriented postgraduate coursework program by distance education at one of two Australian universities known for the size and scope of their distance education programs. The participants were recruited by approaching the administrator of the School of Education at one of these two universities, and the
administrator of the Faculty of Business at the other, and asking them to send an electronic invitation to all students enrolled in their postgraduate coursework programs that were delivered by distance education. This was part of a purposive sampling strategy designed to increase the chances that participants were drawn from different programs and universities with potentially different approaches to educational design. The invitation asked for volunteers who:

- were currently working in some form of profession
- were enrolled in a postgraduate coursework program by distance education
- were studying for reasons that were at least partly career-related
- had already completed several units in their program.

This is known as criterion sampling (Patton, 2002, p. 243) and was designed to ensure that all participants were members of a specific subset of distance learners that were thought to be more likely to have prior experience of the phenomenon being studied and the capacity to provide relevant descriptions and insights. A maximum of fifteen participants were sought which represented a judgement regarding the amount of data needed to produce clear patterns and plausible interpretations without being obviously excessive. Recipients interested in volunteering were asked to contact me for further information and were then sent a plain language statement containing detailed information about the study, a copy of the questions for the first interview, and a nomination and consent form to complete and return if they decided to proceed. No financial incentive was offered for participation in the study but interested persons were advised that being interviewed would provide an opportunity for reflection on their learning experience.

A total of fifteen people returned the consent form and agreed to participate, including one who heard about the study from the researcher’s family members and was accepted because she met the criteria listed above, was studying through one of the universities involved and had no prior relationship with the researcher. The result was a group of eight women and seven men who covered ten different programs, as shown in Table 3.1. While this was a greater variety of programs than I had hoped for, I was nevertheless disappointed to find that fourteen of the fifteen participants came from the same university.
### Table 3.1: Overview of programs and participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disciplinary Field</th>
<th>Programs</th>
<th>Participants*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Doctor of Education</td>
<td>Robert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics/Theology</td>
<td>Master of Arts (Pastoral Counselling)</td>
<td>Deborah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Master of Ethics and Legal Studies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Technology</td>
<td>Master of Networking and Systems Administration</td>
<td>Charles, Michael*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Master of Systems Development</td>
<td>James</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business/Management</td>
<td>Master of Business</td>
<td>Alex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Master of Business (Finance and Economic Analysis)</td>
<td>Steve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Master of Business Administration</td>
<td>Cameron, Janet, Kelly, Natalie, Sarah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Master of Dispute Resolution</td>
<td>Melissa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Master of Human Resource Management</td>
<td>Ann, Clara, Sarah</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Names of participants have been changed to protect their identities. Two participants have recent experiences with more than one program.

* During the analysis and writing processes a decision was made not to use the data from one participant, Michael, because it proved to be too thin for meaningful analysis.

#### 3.5.2 Interview procedures

All participants were given the choice of being interviewed by telephone or Skype. Seven chose to be interviewed by telephone, six chose to be interviewed by Skype and two took advantage of an additional offer to be interviewed face-to-face when they were in close proximity to my own location. My decision not to interview all of the participants face-to-face reflects a pragmatic acceptance of the impracticality of such a strategy since I knew that participants were likely to be scattered across Australia and the world, thus making it prohibitively expensive and time-consuming to visit them in person. It also reflects my view that face-to-face communication does not form a standard part of the distance education setting and that many of the advantages it affords, such as being able to see each other’s facial expressions, can now be gained through telecommunication technologies such as Skype. Participants’ choices, in turn, seemed to reflect a combination of personal...
preference and convenience, with some expressing a clear preference for the affordances of a face-to-face or Skype interview, others opting for Skype as a free and easy way of interacting from an overseas location, and yet others preferring the relative anonymity or temporal flexibility of the telephone. For my own part, I was equally comfortable conducting interviews in each of these three modes, having majored in broadcast journalism during my undergraduate degree and been taught how to communicate and conduct interviews in a variety of modes using a range of mediating technologies.

The initial interview with each participant lasted approximately an hour and was guided by an interview schedule that was provided to participants in advance to enable them to think about the questions and provide more reflective and thoughtful responses. The structure and content of each interview was shaped by the participant’s responses, experiences and concerns and sometimes deviated significantly from the interview schedule, which was simply used as a loose agenda to frame the conversation. The focus of these first interviews was on gaining a better understanding of the participant’s circumstances and exploring their prior experiences of interacting with other people in their lives about the academic content of their studies. Before each interview I adopted an open and empathic phenomenological attitude by setting aside my evolving preconceptions and hunches and preparing to have my understandings challenged, changed or deepened by whatever the participant might tell me (Finlay, 2009, pp. 77–79). A key challenge in conducting each interview was to create an appropriate level of rapport with the participant so they felt comfortable sharing their experiences and the interview became more than a stilted discussion driven by a research question. To help facilitate this, I carefully structured the interview schedule so that it began with more general ‘opening’ questions designed to ‘break the ice’ and get the participant talking. I also drew upon my interview training from my journalism degree and my experience of conducting interviews for my Master of Education research project and used a number of common interview techniques such as ‘mindful listening’, tolerating silences and judiciously sharing my own experiences in a way that made sure not to dominate or distort the interview (Seidman, 2006). This last technique is one that is promoted by experiential hermeneutic phenomenologists such as Bergum (1991), yet discouraged by the creators of IPA because they claim it can lead to a competitive or comparative interview dynamic (Smith et al., 2009, pp. 66–67). However, this was not my experience at all, and I instead found it an invaluable way of breaking
down the natural barrier between researcher and participant and helping me to demonstrate that I was “genuinely present, committed, and open” (Weber, 1986, p. 65) in a way that encouraged participants to share their thoughts and experiences more freely. It also helped me to reduce the possibility of creating what Buber (1970) refers to as ‘I–It’ relationships which can happen when participants feel that the interviewer’s interest in them is limited to what they can tell the interviewer about the phenomenon being investigated (Weber, 1986), or in Buber’s language, ‘it’. Weber (1986, p. 69) further suggests that, “it is only in relating to the other as one human being to another that interviewing is really possible”. A modicum of disclosure and sharing was a key way in which I achieved this.

While the researcher’s interviewing skills and techniques are important in helping to determine the success or otherwise of an interview, so too is the inclination and ability of each participant to become what Rubin and Rubin (2005) describe as a ‘conversational partner’, interested in engaging in a joint exploration of the topic at hand. For this study I was fortunate that most participants were wonderful conversational partners, which resulted in many moments similar to those described by Weber (1986) where a participant and I became caught up in genuine dialogue about their experiences, almost forgetting that we were engaged in an interview. The extent to which such things occurred subsequently influenced my decision regarding whether to invite each participant to take part in a second follow-up interview. When the study was originally conceived it was decided that all participants would be interviewed twice, and this expectation was communicated to each participant in the plain language statement. This decision was inspired by Seidman’s (2006, p. 16) observation that researchers may encounter difficulties if they undertake phenomenological research by conducting ‘one-shot’ interviews with people they’ve never met. It is also consistent with what Smith et al. (2009, p. 52) suggest might be a ‘bolder’ or ‘more adventurous’ design for an IPA study, but do not elaborate on any further. However, after the first round of interviews it became clear that, irrespective of the mode in which an interview took place, the participants varied greatly in both their experience of the phenomenon I was exploring and their capacity as conversational partners. This meant that the quality and value of the data I had collected in the interviews also varied significantly, and while some of the interviews lent readily to a follow-up interview, others did not. Accordingly, after transcribing and analysing all of the first round interviews, I
appraised each one carefully and identified eleven that warranted another interview, then
drafted individualised interview schedules and contacted each of these participants to
organise a second interview. Where the schedule for the first interviews comprised a
generic set of seven relatively open-ended questions, the schedules for the second
interviews comprised a customised and much larger number of both open-ended and
closed questions that broadly divided into three categories: questions designed to fill in or
clarify information about the participant’s life-context and study experience; questions
designed to flesh out and explore things the participant had said in the first interview; and
questions designed to test and explore some of my tentative interpretations and ideas.
Some of these ideas were derived from comments or suggestions made by individual
participants during the first round of interviews, which led to an indirect sharing and
discussion of ideas amongst the participants themselves (Weber, 1986). The second
interviews thus took place from a different point in the hermeneutic circle where my
evolving interpretations and hunches were no longer set aside but rather brought to the
light and examined in conversations with the participants aimed at furthering understanding
through a ‘fusion of our horizons’ (Gadamer, 2013, p. 386). A copy of the first interview
schedule and a composite copy of the second interview schedule are included as
Attachment A.

Of the eleven participants invited to take part in a second interview, eight agreed, two did
not respond and one had changed jobs and could not be contacted. I subsequently
scheduled and conducted interviews with seven of the participants approximately seven
months after the first interviews, each lasting between one and two hours. However, I was
unable to schedule an interview with the remaining participant who had agreed to my
request, despite repeated attempts to do so. While the reasons for this were unclear, they
may well have related to the fact that she had since completed her program and had
probably mentally disengaged from the experience, in much the same way as that reported
in studies by Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins and Shoemaker (2000) and Kazmer
(2004). This also may have been a factor for one of the two participants who did not
respond to my invitation for a second interview and suggests the time between the two
interviews may have been too long. Fortunately, however, the seven participants I was
able to interview were all excellent conversational partners and provided me with ample
additional data and insights. And the exchange was not one-sided — many of these
participants also gained in different ways from our conversations, with one inspired to act upon a long-held ambition to enrol in a PhD program, another embracing a new career as an online academic and taking advantage of my offer to share my expertise in online program design, and several others remarking they had gained valuable insights into their learning styles and preferences.

All of the interviews were recorded electronically using a computer-based audio software program. In addition to these recordings a set of notes was written shortly after each interview that summarised the key aspects of our discussion, captured my first impressions and recorded any salient lessons or ideas I could take from the experience to improve subsequent interviews. Unfortunately, the biggest such lesson related to the fact that part of the first interview with the participant Charles did not record due to my failure to restart the recording after a lengthy drop-out in the Skype connection. However, I immediately sat and wrote up detailed notes of the interview, which I later used to help develop the schedule for Charles' second interview so that it included questions designed to facilitate a repeat of key discussions that had not been recorded. As a result I was able to regain a good deal of the lost data, which reduced the impact of this incident.

3.5.3 Interview transcription procedures

Each of the interviews was transcribed afterwards to facilitate analysis and enable me to accurately quote the participants' words so that their voices shone through. Given that the phenomenological approach I had adopted meant my focus was on understanding the meaning of what the participants said, not how they said it (Poland, 2001), I opted to use a grammatically coherent style of transcription (Rapley, 2007, p. 56) because it led to the production of more readable accounts that better conveyed the participants' meaning. To achieve this I adopted an iterative process whereby I initially transcribed each interview word-for-word but omitted digressions and non-verbal expressions and only noted dysfluencies where they might influence interpretation, such as laughter and significant pauses. I then reviewed this initial transcript while listening back to the recording and made minor grammatical corrections and edits to render it more readable while staying as close as possible to what had been said. I also checked for anything that might make the participant identifiable or cause them concern if it were published and either reworded, paraphrased or deleted such passages as necessary.
The result was a set of interview transcripts that strove to capture the spirit of each interview and honour the aural interview experience rather than slavishly record the precise words that had been spoken. I subsequently provided each participant with a copy of their interview transcripts so they could check that they were accurate and did not contain any material that concerned them or made them feel vulnerable. I also invited them to vet short biographical profiles of themselves for use in the thesis and published papers. Of the fifteen participants, eleven checked and returned their interview transcripts and biographical profiles and two indicated verbally that they were comfortable with the interviews and did not feel a need to do so. I also gave the participants the option of choosing their own pseudonyms, although the majority left it up to me to select something suitable. Through this process, I gradually came to view the transcripts as a consensually agreed representation of the conversation rather than a reified verbatim account, something that was in keeping with the relativist ontological perspective adopted in this study.

### 3.6 Data interpretation procedures

To interpret the interview data gathered for this study, an appropriate set of procedures were required that were consistent with principles of interpretative phenomenological analysis. This section describes the two-stage interview analysis procedures used to explore the occurrence and learning contributions of participants' life-context interactions. It also describes the writing procedures used to present the results of this analysis.

#### 3.6.1 Initial thematic analysis procedures

IPA procedures of analysis involve iteratively and inductively moving from the particular to the shared, and from the descriptive to the interpretative (Smith et al., 2009, p. 79). In this study, the process began by reading an electronic copy of one of the first interview transcripts, marking up the information needed for a biographical profile of the participant, and drafting the profile. I then read through the transcript again and highlighted those passages that related to the participant’s engagement in life-context interactions about the academic content of their studies, or lack thereof, before making what Smith et al. (2009, p. 84) term descriptive and conceptual comments regarding who the participant was — and was not — interacting with, what they were discussing and the things that seemed to be prompting or discouraging these interactions. From time to time I listened back to sections
of the audio recording of the interview so that I could hear the participant’s voice and clarify subtle aspects of how they had spoken about key points. I also re-read my original interview notes as I re-engaged with my evolving hunches (Smith et al., 2009, p. 35) and made note of any questions to follow up with the participant in the second interview.

After repeating this initial level of analysis with approximately four transcripts I reviewed the results and started looking for emergent themes. I began by identifying and provisionally labelling the different types of interactions that seemed to have actively contributed to participants’ learning, along with a few that seemed to have enhanced their learning experience but not necessarily their learning per se. I also provisionally labelled the factors that were contributing to the extent to which the participant was engaging in these interactions. I then compiled a list of each of these interaction types and influencing factors, sorted them into clusters and identified a suitable thematic label for each cluster. After recoding each of transcripts so that I could visually see how the emergent themes played out for each participant, I moved on to a new transcript and began a process of moving backwards and forwards between new transcripts and old ones as existing themes were refined and new ones emerged. I also repeated a similar process to analyse each participant’s experiences of interacting with their lecturers and the other learners in their program. Throughout these processes I made note of those ideas and suggestions raised by participants that I wanted to explore further through the literature and the second round of interviews, along with key quotes that seemed to sum up common themes or notable aspects of their experiences. I also wrote a summary document for each participant that helped me to shift from a place in the hermeneutic circle where my focus was on dissecting and analysing the parts of each interview to a place where my focus was instead on trying to understand each interview as a whole and all of the interviews as a collective. After conducting and transcribing the second round of interviews, I repeated an abridged version of these procedures using the thematic labels already identified.

3.6.2 Subsequent theoretical analysis procedures

Changing the focus of the analysis from description to interpretation, I searched for an appropriate theoretical framework that could be used to enrich my understanding and interpretation of the ways in which the participants’ interactions with other people in their lives had contributed to their learning. In doing so, I was effectively taking what Smith et al.
(2009, p. 106) describe as a middle position between a ‘hermeneutics of empathy’ and a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ by accepting the participants’ claims regarding the contributions made by these interactions, but attempting to explore how these fitted with the extant literature on categories of learning. Initially I compared the interactions participants said had contributed to their learning with two seminal taxonomies of learning: the revised edition of Bloom’s taxonomy of the cognitive learning domain (Anderson et al., 2001) and Krathwohl’s taxonomy of the affective learning domain (Krathwohl, Bloom & Masia, 1964). However, I found that while a substantial number of these interactions accorded with the categories of learning set out in these taxonomies, some did not, even though they seemed to be broadly affective in nature.

As an alternative, I examined Fink’s taxonomy of significant learning (Fink, 2003), which is depicted here in Figure 3.2. Fink’s taxonomy was developed to reflect changes in thinking regarding the different kinds of learning that higher education institutions aspire to facilitate for their students. Its strength is that it builds upon, updates and expands Bloom’s taxonomy of the cognitive learning domain (Anderson et al., 2001) and Krathwohl’s taxonomy of the affective learning domain (Krathwohl et al., 1964) by drawing upon the ideas of a wide range of contemporary learning theorists. These include the notions of critical reflection (Mezirow, 1985; Brookfield, 1987; Schön, 1983), interdisciplinary learning (Davis, 1995; Newell & Klein, 1996), learning communities (Shapiro & Levine, 1999), personal competence and social competence (Goleman, 1995), self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 1999; 2001), self-directed learning (Knowles, 1975; Mezirow, 1985; Candy, 1991), self-regulated learning (Pintrich, 1995; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1998), surface, deep and strategic orientations to learning (Marton, Hounsell & Entwistle, 1997), and transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991). It also attempts to depict the relational and interactive nature of learning, with Fink (2003, p. 32) arguing that learning experiences designed to trigger any one form of significant learning generally will also trigger others. However, the taxonomy has several weaknesses, including the non-denotative and abstruse category titles ‘Human Dimension’ and ‘Caring’, a failure to adequately incorporate the psychomotor learning domain explicated by theorists such as Harrow (1972), a less detailed and systematic approach to articulating subcategories of learning than Krathwohl et al. (1964), Anderson et al. (2001) or Harrow (1972), and a very uneven distribution of subcategories of learning across its six categories, with the Application’
category comprising two-thirds of Bloom’s cognitive domain as well as the entire psychomotor domain while other categories such as ‘Learning How to Learn’ and ‘Caring’ include nothing of equivalent magnitude.

Figure 3.2: Fink’s taxonomy of significant learning

(Based on Fink, 2003, pp. 30 and 33)

While the strengths of Fink’s taxonomy made it possible to categorise the learning contributions of all of the participants’ life-context interactions, its weaknesses meant that some cognitive learning contributions were categorised with less precision than when using Bloom’s taxonomy of the cognitive domain, while many affective learning contributions were labelled with abstruse and awkward category titles. Since Fink’s taxonomy seemed the best option available, I decided to address these weaknesses by drawing upon my skills as an educational designer and reshaping it into something more precise, denotive and balanced. To help with this I compared Fink’s taxonomy with the structure and details
of several other learning taxonomies, including UNESCO’s four pillars of learning (Delors, 1996; UNESCO, 2014), summarised here in Table 3.2.

**Table 3.2: UNESCO’s four pillars of learning**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning to Know</th>
<th>Learning to Do</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“[Developing] the cognitive tools required to better comprehend the world and its complexities” (UNESCO, 2014). “This also means learning to learn, so as to benefit from the opportunities education provides throughout life” (Delors, 1996, p. 97).</td>
<td>“[Developing] the skills that would enable individuals to effectively participate in the global economy and society” (UNESCO, 2014).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning to Be</th>
<th>Learning to Live Together</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“[Developing] self analytical and social skills to [develop to the] fullest potential psycho-socially, affectively as well as physically, for an all-round ‘complete’ person” (UNESCO, 2014).</td>
<td>“Developing an understanding of other people and an appreciation of interdependence – carrying out joint projects and learning to manage conflicts – in a spirit of respect for the values of pluralism, mutual understanding and peace” (Delors, 1996, p. 97).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This indicated there was a logical relationship between the categories of learning described in Fink’s taxonomy and those in UNESCO’s four pillars of learning, with UNESCO’s four pillars providing four meta-categories and the elements of Fink’s taxonomy forming eight more evenly distributed subcategories — one each from the four categories of Foundational Knowledge, Learning How to Learn, Integration and Caring, two from the category of Application and two from the category of Human Dimension. The titles and descriptors of the four pillars of learning then aided with the identification of more appropriate and denotative subcategory titles, and the results are shown in Figure 3.3 and described in more detail in Table 3.3. Using these subcategories I then reanalysed the participants’ life-context interactions and found I was able to identify and label the learning contributions of each with a much higher degree of clarity and precision.
Figure 3.3: A reconfiguration of Fink’s (2003) taxonomy of significant learning
### Table 3.3: A reconfiguration of Fink’s taxonomy of significant learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning to Know</th>
<th>Learning to Do</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Foundational Knowledge</strong></td>
<td><strong>Thinking Skills</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locating, understanding, remembering or consolidating:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Factual information</td>
<td>• Practical thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Procedural information</td>
<td>• Critical thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Conceptual ideas</td>
<td>• Creative thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Metacognitive Knowledge</strong></td>
<td><strong>Psychomotor Skills</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding or utilising:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• General strategies for learning and thinking</td>
<td>• Reflex movements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Disciplinary approaches to constructing knowledge</td>
<td>• Fundamental movements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Personal preferences and motivations for using</td>
<td>• Perceptual abilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>particular strategies</td>
<td>• Physical abilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Criteria for selecting appropriate strategies</td>
<td>• Skilled movements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Learning to Be</strong></td>
<td>• Non-discursive communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal Attributes</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing, affirming or transforming:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Values, ethics and beliefs</td>
<td>• Written and verbal communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Meaning schemes and meaning perspectives</td>
<td>• Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Interests and passions</td>
<td>• Teamwork</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Personal and professional sense of identity</td>
<td>• Relationship building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Self-esteem</td>
<td>• Negotiation, conflict management and dispute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal Competence</strong></td>
<td>resolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing, enhancing or transforming:</td>
<td>• Empathy and understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Self-awareness</td>
<td>• Cultural competence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Self-regulation</td>
<td>• Citizenship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Motivation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Self-authorship</td>
<td><strong>Integration Skills</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Learning to Live Together</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interpersonal Skills</strong></td>
<td><strong>Integration Skills</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing, utilising or enhancing:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Written and verbal communication</td>
<td>• Academic and non-academic knowledge and practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Leadership</td>
<td>• Multiple perspectives and opinions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teamwork</td>
<td>• Different disciplinary perspectives and practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Relationship building</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Negotiation, conflict management and dispute</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>resolution</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Empathy and understanding</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Cultural competence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Citizenship</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

(Adapted from Fink, 2003 and drawing upon taxonomic elements of the work of Harrow, 1972; Flavell, 1979; Mezirow, 1991; Goleman, 1995; Delors, 1996; Baxter Magolda, 1999; 2001; and Anderson et al., 2001.)
3.6.3 Writing procedures

IPA writing procedures involve presenting the results of the thematic analysis in a way that maintains an idiographic focus on the individual participants (Smith et al., 2009, pp. 106–107). To help establish this idiographic focus, I began my presentation of the results of this study with a biographical profile of each participant that included quotations drawn from the interview transcripts so that the voice of each participant could be heard. I then developed a description of each theme that is illustrated with a number of idiographic examples based on the experiences of individual participants, with liberal use made of quotes from their interview transcripts. To help depict both the parts and the whole of participants’ experiences, I also developed several longer holistic examples to illustrate the ways different themes worked together in combination to produce particular outcomes for particular participants. In order to contain the number of examples included while ensuring that the voice of each participant was represented, I developed a matrix of the themes against which I mapped the experiences of each participant. In keeping with Smith et al.’s (2009, pp. 115–116) advice on working with larger samples, I then identified the participants that best illustrated either a particular theme or the effects of the themes in combination and made selections to ensure that every participant was represented and no participant was given excessive focus. During this process it became clear that the interview data gathered from one participant were too ‘thin’ for meaningful analysis and could not support the development of an illustrative thematic example of sufficient quality. I therefore decided to exclude this participant’s data from formal analysis, although it did continue to help shape my ideas more generally.

As is common in IPA studies, I chose to present the results using interpretive description and to then draw upon the extant disciplinary literature in a separate discussion of the implications of these results for disciplinary theory and practice. In accordance with the advice of Smith et al. (2009, p. 96) I also developed a series of schematic diagrams and tables that depicted how the experiences of each participant related to each of the identified themes. These were then incorporated into the introduction of each theme to provide an overview of the results and to enhance understanding. Given that there is no clear-cut distinction between the two processes of analysis and writing (Smith et al., 2009, p. 110), the process of writing up each theme helped to further refine my interpretations.
and understandings. This meant that the analysis process continued in tandem with the writing process, with each informing the other (Smith et al., 2009, p. 108).

3.7 Research trustworthiness

There are no universal standards or criteria for establishing or assessing the trustworthiness of qualitative research. For researchers using interpretative phenomenological analysis, Smith et al. (2009) advocate the use of Yardley’s (2000) proposed principles of sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency, coherence and impact and importance. Each of these principles is discussed in turn and corresponded with other well-known criteria for assessing the trustworthiness of qualitative research, with the final principle identified using Yardley’s alternate descriptor of ‘impact and utility’ in keeping with the terminology used elsewhere in this thesis.

3.7.1 Sensitivity to context

Sensitivity to context can mean a range of different things (Yardley, 2000), but broadly corresponds with Huberman and Miles’ (2002, p. 271) criterion of authenticity. In this study it has been taken to mean sensitivity to the context of theory and sensitivity to the context of the participants. Sensitivity to the context of theory is important because this study aims to contribute to distance education theory-building by showing how the emergent concepts of distance learners’ life-contexts and life-context interactions might link with and contribute to the development of existing distance education theories and models. Accordingly, considerable attention was paid to exploring the literature surrounding these concepts, identifying appropriate labels and definitions for them that are sympathetic to the terminology used in related theories and models, and critiquing these theories and models and the assumptions inherent within them. The adoption of the concept development theoretical framework was important in this regard, because it provided a systematic way of approaching these matters.

Sensitivity to the context of the participants was critical to the conduct of this study given the selection of interviewing as the data collection method. This was addressed in several ways, including allowing the participants to choose the date, time and mode of their interview, developing an interview schedule that encouraged participants to talk about relevant aspects of their contexts, conducting the interviews with an empathic
phenomenological attitude so that I remained open to each participants’ experiences and contexts, and employing an iterative transcription process that strove to capture the spirit of each interview without revealing anything that made the participants identifiable or caused them concern. It is also reflected in the approach taken to presenting the results of this study, which includes a biographical profile of each participant that allows the reader to engage with them as a person in context rather than simply a research subject.

3.7.2 Commitment and rigour

Commitment and rigour broadly refers to the adequacy of the researcher’s engagement with the study topic and their approaches to data collection and data analysis (Yardley, 2000). It is similar to the criterion of dependability described by both Huberman and Miles (2002, p. 271) and Lincoln and Guba (1985, pp. 316–318). In this study, commitment and rigour has been demonstrated by employing a purposive sampling strategy that resulted in a group of participants who were drawn from a spread of different disciplinary programs and who varied in the extent and nature of their experiences in engaging in life-context interactions. This facilitated the analysis of both the occurrence and learning contributions of these interactions and the factors that promoted or inhibited distance learners’ engagement in them. Commitment and rigour has also been shown in my decision to interview participants twice and in the time and care taken to analyse the interview data and to develop individualised interview schedules for the second interviews. While this resulted in a delay between the first and second interviews that was longer than ideal, it also improved the quality of the analysis by allowing interpretations and ideas that emerged from the first interviews to be subsequently tested with some of the participants.

3.7.3 Transparency

In this study, transparency means the degree to which all relevant aspects of the research process have been disclosed to both participants and readers (Yardley, 2000). It is similar to a combination of the criteria of attention to ethics described by Huberman and Miles (2002, p. 272) and confirmability described by both Huberman and Miles and Lincoln and Guba (1985, pp. 318–327). For participants in this study, transparency was demonstrated prior to their formal involvement by providing each of them with a detailed plan language statement and a copy of the questions for the first interview to enable them to understand the study’s aims and procedures prior to making a decision to proceed. It then continued
by providing each of them with a copy of their interview transcripts to check, and by inviting them to choose their own pseudonyms and to vet short biographical profiles of themselves. For the reader, transparency has been shown by the way in which I have reflexively discussed the experiences and motivations that have led me to undertake this study, along with the research processes used and the challenges experienced along the way. This has included discussing the difficulties experienced in identifying the most appropriate research approach for this study, as well as problems experienced during data collection and analysis such as failing to record most of one interview, identifying that another was too ‘thin’ for analysis and being unable to secure second interviews with some participants.

3.7.4 Coherence

Coherence refers to the level of ‘fit’ between the research purpose and questions and the various aspects of the research methodology and design, including the chosen theoretical perspective and research approach (Yardley, 2000). It bears some resemblance to the criterion of credibility described by Lincoln and Guba (1985, pp. 301–316). In this study, coherence has been demonstrated by recognising that the study’s central purpose was to develop a better understanding of the occurrence and significance of an emergent disciplinary concept and subsequently adopting the concept development theoretical perspective and associated concept synthesis strategy as appropriate means of supporting this endeavour. It has further been demonstrated by the way in which ‘concepts in theories’ was selected as the underpinning philosophical view of concepts on the basis that it was congruent with the research questions, which involved exploring the linkages between the study’s findings and disciplinary theory. The accompanying interpretative phenomenological analysis research approach was similarly selected in part because it permitted the engagement with disciplinary theory, and also because it was congruent with the contextualist epistemological position associated with the ‘concepts in theories’ view of concepts. In keeping with Smith et al.’s (2009) guidelines for interpretative phenomenological analysis, a purposive sampling strategy was then used to guide the data collection process and semi-structured interviews were used to implement it. Taken together, these things mean there is an appropriate level of ‘fit’ between the research purpose and questions for this study and the various elements of the research methodology and design.
3.7.5 Impact and utility

Impact and utility refer to the extent to which research findings have theoretical or practical worth and are useful for the applications or groups they were intended to serve (Yardley, 2000). It broadly equates to a combination of the criteria of applicability described by Huberman and Miles (2002, p. 272) and transferrability described by both Huberman and Miles (2002, p. 271) and Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 316). In this study, the potential impact and utility of the concept of life-context interactions is initially explored during the conceptualisation phase by locating it in the literature related to distance education research, theory and practice. It is later addressed in more depth by discussing the implications of the findings of the exploration phase for concept verification and utility, and for distance education theories, models and design. Impact and utility are also addressed by discussing how the results of this study might pave the way for further research that explores the life-contexts and life-context interactions of other types of learners in educational settings beyond distance education that share similar characteristics and dynamics. This is consistent with Lincoln and Guba’s (1985, p.316) notion of transferability, and to assist researchers and practitioners assess the transferability of the findings to other educational contexts, a description is included of each of the postgraduate coursework programs undertaken by this study’s participants.

3.8 Summary

The research methodology and design selected for this study was guided by a concept development theoretical framework and underpinned by the ‘concepts in theories’ philosophical view of concepts. It involved a three-phase project design based on the concept synthesis strategy developed by Walker and Avant (2011) and enhanced with elements of the work of Sartori (1984), Schwartz-Barcott and Kim (1986; 2000) and Meleis (2012). The initial conceptualisation phase entailed noticing the phenomenon of distance learners’ life-context interactions and developing a conceptual label and working definition for the phenomenon using guidelines developed by Sartori (1984). It also involved locating the concept in the distance education literature in order to explore its potential disciplinary significance and show that it merited further exploration and development. The subsequent exploration phase entailed undertaking research using the interpretative phenomenological analysis approach developed by Smith and associates (Smith, 1996; Smith & Osborn,
to verify the occurrence of life-context interactions and better understand their contributions to learning. This was achieved by interviewing working professionals studying vocationally-oriented postgraduate coursework programs by distance education and interpreting the resulting data by conducting both a thematic analysis and a theoretical analysis and exploring how the participants' perceptions of the learning contributions made by these interactions correspond with the categories of learning in a reconfigured version of Fink's (2003) taxonomy of significant learning. The final integration phase entailed exploring the implications of this study's findings for concept verification and utility as well as for distance education theories, models and design. It also involved considering what the findings might mean for future research both within and beyond distance education. While there are no universal standards or criteria for assessing the trustworthiness of these findings, it is suggested that readers might consider how the conduct of this study conforms with the principles of sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency, coherence and impact and utility proposed by Yardley (2000).

This chapter concludes the preliminary discussion of the context for this study and the research methodology and design used to conduct it. The next chapter begins the presentation of the study's findings by describing how the phenomenon of distance learners' life-context interactions was initially noticed, labelled and defined during the conceptualisation phase of the project.
Chapter 4: Conceptualising Life-Context Interactions

This chapter establishes the concept of life-context interactions, which is central to this thesis. It does so by addressing the first research question and describing three of the activities undertaken during the conceptualisation phase of this study: noticing and giving attention to an emergent disciplinary phenomenon, identifying an appropriate conceptual label for the phenomenon and developing a working definition for it. Although these activities might sound sequential, the reality is that “conceptualizing is never reducible to a linear set of components or to a neat and tidy set of processes” (Meleis, 2012, p. 381). This chapter therefore attempts to capture some of the iterative messiness of this phase.

4.1 Noticing a phenomenon of potential significance

Discovery commences with the awareness of anomaly. (Kuhn, 1996, p. 52)

Meleis (2012, p. 381) describes the process of noticing a phenomenon as, “sensing, pausing, and taking in […] a situation that has attracted our attention for whatever reason, whether that reason is cognitive, affective, objective, or subjective, or whether it is a hunch or just an uneasy feeling.” In this study, the process of noticing the phenomenon began with a hunch that developed when I was in the process of preparing the full research proposal. My original intention was to explore the interpersonal interaction preferences of postgraduate coursework distance learners. As I explored the literature, however, I began reflecting on my own experience in completing a postgraduate coursework program by distance education and wondered whether there was any relationship between the nature of these learners’ personal or professional lives and their attitudes towards interacting with other learners. As I tried to pinpoint the nature of my concern, I struggled to find the language to express the idea of distance learners’ everyday personal and professional lives, which inhibited my capacity to think about it given the extent to which I perceive and make sense of the world through words. I therefore turned to the distance education literature to locate the standard disciplinary term, but instead found the plethora of phrases and descriptions that are presented in the next section of this chapter. This gave me pause for thought, and I began wondering whether this idea was simply not important enough to the field of distance education to have been given a standard term. As I vacillated over
whether I was noticing a significant silence, engaging in a wild goose chase or simply looking in the wrong places, three further anomalies in the literature became apparent: first, the current conceptual model of modes of interaction in distance education (Anderson & Kuskis, 2007) does not recognise the interactions distance learners may have with other people in their lives about the academic content of their studies; second, the general literature describing the characteristics of distance learners in advanced industrialised nations (see, for example, Kirkwood & Price, 2005; Peters, 2008; Moore & Kearsley, 2012) rarely distinguishes between those enrolled in postgraduate coursework programs and those enrolled in undergraduate programs; and third, the general literature on lifelong learners (see for example Field, 2006; Jarvis, 2007; 2009) accords only limited attention to the rise of postgraduate coursework learners.

Taken together, these anomalies made me think that I might be noticing something of significance. Consistent with Toulmin’s (1972, p. 168) observation that the development of an emergent disciplinary concept is preceded by the identification of new disciplinary issues, I began to realise that with little fanfare, the postgraduate coursework distance learners with whom I was centrally concerned — and of whom I was one myself — were transforming the distance education student population by actualising the lifelong learning agenda and returning to study in growing numbers in order to update their existing skills and knowledge, change careers or improve their capacity to perform new roles. This realisation caused me to focus my thoughts on a fundamental issue I had been pondering since undertaking my Postgraduate Certificate of Education: what was the difference between undertaking my undergraduate degree on-campus as a young adult fresh out of secondary school, and undertaking my postgraduate coursework program in my thirties by online distance education as a mid-career professional? And to what extent was any difference acknowledged and reflected in the theory that underpinned the design of postgraduate coursework programs delivered by distance education?

As I reflected on my undergraduate experience, I was struck by the degree to which my life had revolved around my studies in a way that simply was not the case when I undertook my postgraduate studies. During my undergraduate degree, my primary occupation was as a student and my time was principally devoted to attending classes, researching and writing papers and enjoying university life. I socialised with the other learners in my cohort, revelling in our shared interests and my newfound sense of belonging. During my
postgraduate studies, however, my primary occupation was as an educational designer rather than as a student. Much of my time was spent developing distance education materials and my university papers were researched and written in my spare time. I still socialised with the other learners in my cohort through online communication technologies, but I had mixed feelings about this, enjoying some of the friendships that developed but sometimes resenting the time involved and the sense of obligation I felt. I also discussed the academic content of my studies regularly with my workplace colleagues, valuing their perspectives and the opportunity to explore exactly how the content might translate into practice. In short, with study no longer at the centre of my existence, I was less concerned with immersing myself in the university experience and more concerned with making sure that my studies both fitted in with and contributed to the various elements of my broader existing life.

I wondered to what extent this was true for other postgraduate coursework learners who chose to study by distance education? How did their postgraduate learning experience compare with their undergraduate learning experience? Were they similarly more concerned with fitting their postgraduate studies into their lives rather than immersing themselves in the university experience? Did they, too, discuss the academic content of their studies with other people in their lives? What did they gain from any such interactions? Did they contribute to their learning, or were they of peripheral concern? And why did there not seem to be any discussion of such interactions in the distance education literature? Was I just not using the right search terms? This last question brought me back to the problem that there was no standard term in the distance education literature for learners’ everyday personal and professional lives. If I was to pursue this issue, it seemed the logical place to begin was by settling on such a term.
4.2 Labelling the concept

… in the beginning is the word, that is, naming. We express what we mean (what we have in mind) by picking from within the ambit of our natural language the ‘right words’. Conversely, we are unable to express exactly what we mean unless we find words for it. (Sartori, 1984, p. 17)

4.2.1 Uncovering the problem of conceptual synonymy

The problem of finding the ‘right words’ for the idea of distance learners’ everyday personal and professional lives is one that appears to have confronted many distance education researchers and scholars. When I first searched the distance education literature prior to adopting the concept development theoretical framework, I uncovered around 20 different terms for this idea. When I later searched the literature more thoroughly and systematically, that number increased to 40, as evidenced in Table 4.1. This situation is known as arbitrary conceptual synonymy — the idiosyncratic selection and use of different words by each scholar to mean essentially the same thing (Sartori, 1984). Conceptual synonymy can arise for many reasons, and in this instance it may be partly attributable to both the relative difficulty of searching for relevant literature prior to the advent of online databases and search engines, along with the tendency for some research into online education not to refer to or build upon the earlier distance education literature. On the surface conceptual synonymy can seem inconsequential — after all, as Shakespeare’s Juliet remarked, a rose by any other name still smells as sweet. However, apart from creating “terminological waste” (Sartori, 1984, p. 39), conceptual synonymy makes it harder to focus attention on a phenomenon because without an agreed conceptual label or ‘term’ there is nothing to shape and guide our thoughts or order our perceptions and experiences. “What is not named largely remains unnoticed or, in any event, impervious to cognitive development” (Sartori, 1984, p. 16). A phenomenon may therefore be ‘hiding in plain sight’, obscured by a host of conceptual synonyms. Agreed conceptual labels also act as linguistic reservoirs for the accumulation of knowledge and ideas about phenomena (Sartori, 1984; Meleis, 2012, p. 371); without them, our knowledge is diffused and fails to accumulate in a way that is readily accessible. Conceptual synonymy thus makes it difficult for disciplinary scholars to search for and synthesise the existing knowledge surrounding a phenomenon because in order to locate it they must try to guess at the many, many keywords and terms that others may have arbitrarily used rather than simply using a known
and widely used term. Thus, “at base, it does matter which word we chose: The ‘terming’ of a concept is a decision of central consequence” (Sartori, 1984, p. 60).

**Table 4.1: Terms in the literature for distance learners’ personal and professional lives**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Broader context</td>
<td>Evans (1994, p. 16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily environment</td>
<td>Rye &amp; Støkken (2012, Introduction section, ¶ 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily social world</td>
<td>Rye &amp; Støkken (2012, The importance of the local context section, ¶ 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everyday lifeworld</td>
<td>Dickie (1999, p. 86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everyday life</td>
<td>Östlund (2005, p. 6); Støkken (2005, p. 3); Fredskild (2008, p. 11); Wozniak, Mahony, Lever &amp; Pizzica (2009, Abstract section)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everyday situation</td>
<td>Östlund (2005, p. 7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family, work and social life</td>
<td>Kember (1989, p. 289)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families, workplaces and communities</td>
<td>Anderson (2003b, p. 132)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home and work environments</td>
<td>Kember (1999, p. 110)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home and work life</td>
<td>Raddon (2007, pp. 159–160)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home community</td>
<td>Kazmer (2005, p. 194)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home context</td>
<td>Grace (1991, p. 165)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home, work and friend worlds</td>
<td>Haythornthwaite &amp; Kazmer (2002, p. 457)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life context</td>
<td>White (2005, p. 171); Hunter (2007, p. 6); Wells &amp; Brook (2009, p. 46); Murphy, Shelley &amp; Baumann (2010, p. 128)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life situation</td>
<td>Gibson (1993, p. 80); Eastmond (1995, p. 55)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life–work situation</td>
<td>Gillis et al. (2000, Qualitative findings section, ¶ 8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local community</td>
<td>Kazmer (2005, p. 194)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Chapter 4: Conceptualising Life-Context Interactions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local context</td>
<td>Saumure (2010, p. 170)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local environment</td>
<td>Östlund (2005, p. 2); Saumure (2010, p. 214)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal and/or professional environments</td>
<td>White (2003, p. 112)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal contexts</td>
<td>Kelly &amp; Shapcott (1987, p. 3); Grace (1991, p. 183)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal lives</td>
<td>Wozniak, Mahony, Lever &amp; Pizzica (2009, Orientation as a process of transition between lives section, ¶ 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal, work and family life</td>
<td>Carr, Fullerton, Severino &amp; McHugh (1996, Impact of the program on student life section, ¶ 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private, family, social and work environment</td>
<td>Kember (1999, p. 113)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional, family and social lives</td>
<td>Kearsley (2002, p. 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real-world contexts</td>
<td>Burge (1998, p. 37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social and workplace contexts</td>
<td>Taplin &amp; Jegede (2001, p. 133)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social context</td>
<td>Evans &amp; Nation (1989, p. 39); Gibson (1998, p. 113)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social environment</td>
<td>Kember (1999, p. 120); Bhalalusesa (2001, pp. 155–156)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social/family/work environment</td>
<td>White (2005, p. 168)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social/family/work obligations</td>
<td>Guri-Rosenblit (1999, p. 66)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social setting</td>
<td>Kember (1999, p. 120)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social systems</td>
<td>Gibson (2003, p. 150)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social/work/family environment</td>
<td>White (2003, p. 128)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work, family and social environments</td>
<td>Kember (1989, p. 295); Kember (1999, p. 120)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work, family and social lives</td>
<td>Eastmond (1995, pp. 54–55)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Eight other terms were identified during the search process but were excluded when they were found not to be true synonyms during the process of reviewing the conceptual label: environment (Billings, 1988); extracurricular concerns (Moore & Kearsley (2012)); local life (Rye & Støkken, 2012); personal settings (Gibson, 1998); personal and social contexts (Grace, 1991); professional and personal worlds (Holt, Petzall & Vlijmen, 1990; Holt, 1992); social networks (Eastmond, 1995); and work and family life (Murphy & Yum, 1998).
4.2.2 Choosing a conceptual label

... as we are (semantically) prisoners of the words we pick, we had better pick them well. (Sartori, 1984, p. 60)

According to Sartori (1984), in resolving the problem of conceptual synonymy and deciding upon a conceptual label or term for a given phenomenon, it is important to consider how a proposed label would relate to and fit with any neighbouring words or terms within the associated field. In this case, it was important that the term could be used to describe a mode of interaction in distance education and potentially incorporated into the conceptual model of modes of interaction in distance education (Anderson & Kuskis, 2007), which refers, for example, to learner—learner interactions, learner—teacher interactions and learner—content interactions. This meant that it needed to be succinct, in addition to being as unambiguous as possible to ensure clarity of meaning. Prior to adopting the concept development framework, I assessed each of the terms that I found in my original search of the distance education literature against these three criteria and found each of them wanting due to either long-windedness, ambiguity or lack of utility as a mode of interaction. I therefore decided to try coining my own term for the phenomenon — in other words, creating a neologism. Sartori (1984) suggests there are three prerequisites for creating neologisms: parsimony of invention, gradualness of introduction and easy intelligibility. The first of these had been at the back of my mind as I searched the distance education literature, struggling to accept that I could not find a suitable term amongst the many that already existed. The last was subsequently at the forefront of my mind as I tried to coin a new term that met my three criteria.

After considering and discarding several possibilities, I began contemplating the phrase ‘work-life context’, which I adapted from the commonly used term ‘work-life balance’. Unfortunately, the compound word ‘work-life’ seemed ambiguous when used in this way and could be interpreted as meaning either ‘work and life’ or ‘working life’. Once I removed the word ‘work’, however, I was left with the term ‘life-context’, which struck me as a viable solution. It was succinct, it seemed to be intuitively self-explanatory, and it could be used to form the cogent label of ‘life-context interactions’ when incorporated into the conceptual model of modes of interactions in distance education. It also seemed consistent with the Rortian technique of using “familiar words in unfamiliar ways” (Rorty, 1989, p. 18) to ‘redescribe’ an inadequately articulated concept in a way that might encourage distance
educators to see the concept differently and ask “new and possibly interesting questions” about it (Rorty, 1989, p. 9).

4.2.3 Reviewing the choice of conceptual label

Some time later, after adopting the concept development theoretical framework, I realised I needed to improve the rigour of the process through which I had chosen the term ‘life-context’. As an initial step, I undertook a second more thorough search of the literature for terms referring to the idea of distance learners’ everyday personal and professional lives. When I had originally undertaken this task, I used three key strategies:

1. Interrogating the relevant literature cited in the three texts I thought most likely to direct me to further discussions of the phenomenon: Anderson and Kuskis (2007), Eastmond (1995) and Gibson (1998).


When I searched the literature again I used the following additional strategies:

4. Interrogating the relevant literature cited in all of the texts I had found previously that included terms for distance learners’ everyday personal and professional lives.


6. Interrogating the relevant literature cited in all of the additional texts located through the above strategies.
7. Interrogating the literature listed on Google Scholar as having cited each of the additional texts located through the above strategies.

8. Checking all of the texts located in both the original and subsequent search to see whether they listed any keywords I might use to conduct further targeted searches.

Through this process I uncovered 23 additional terms for distance learners’ personal and professional lives, as shown in Table 4.1, before reaching a point of theoretical saturation where few new terms could be found. Encouragingly, one of these additional terms was the very term I had already chosen — ‘life-context’ — which I found had been used by White (2005), Hunter (2007), Murphy, Wells and Brook (2009) and Shelley and Baumann (2010), as well as by academics writing in the related fields of adult education and workplace education (for example, Nielsen & Kvale, 2006, p. 122; Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007, p. ix). To ensure I had not overlooked a better alternative, I made an assessment of each of the new terms using the same criteria as before: brevity, lack of ambiguity and utility as a mode of interaction. From this process, two possible alternatives emerged: ‘daily life’ and ‘everyday life’. However, both suffered from the problem that they might be construed as excluding those contexts and incidences that occurred infrequently.

Aware that I might have an unconscious bias towards remaining with the term I had previously chosen, I decided to perform one last check by applying the substitution test recommended by Sartori (1984) and taking sample passages from the literature that used each of the alternative terms and replacing these with the term ‘life-context’ to see whether this improved overall clarity and precision while preserving the intended meaning. When I first applied the substitution test I naively assumed that the outcome would be essentially black or white: either the substitution would work successfully in nearly all cases, or it would not. The reality, however, was that although there were many cases where the term ‘life-context’ could be successfully substituted for the original term, there were also quite a number where it could not. This caused me to wonder whether I had chosen the best term after all, however, when I tried performing the substitution test using the term ‘everyday life’ instead, I came up against a similar number of problem cases. Returning to my preferred term ‘life-context’, I isolated those examples where the substitution did not work and began analysing why. After identifying and removing several terms that, upon closer inspection, I realised were not true synonyms and should not have been included, I came to the realisation that no single term would work in all instances and what was needed instead
was a small suite of terms that would eliminate the problem of arbitrary conceptual synonymy by providing a suitable but limited set of options to choose from. With this change of perspective I identified a simple solution: rather than proffering the term ‘life-context’ as the conceptual label, I should proffer instead the longer and more descriptive phrase ‘personal and professional life-context’ from which a small suite of shorter terms could be derived, including ‘life-context’, ‘personal life-context’, ‘professional life-context’, ‘personal and professional life’ and perhaps even simply ‘context’. Using this new approach, I repeated the substitution test with considerable success. Although I identified a handful of instances where I felt the author had a specific meaning or theoretical perspective in mind that might be best served by their original choice of wording, in all other cases the substitution seemed to preserve the intended meaning whilst improving clarity or precision. ‘Personal and professional life-context’ thus seemed to be a good choice as a conceptual label that would suit both my own and others’ purposes.

4.3 Developing a working definition

Make sure that the definiens of a concept is adequate and parsimonious: adequate in that it contains enough characteristics to identify the referents and their boundaries; parsimonious in that no accompanying property is included among the necessary, defining properties. (Sartori, 1984, p. 56)

After a phenomenon has been conceptually labelled, a working definition should be developed that clearly communicates what the label is intended to mean. This can then be used to guide subsequent exploratory research (Walker & Avant, 2011). In Rule 4 of his guidelines for naming and defining disciplinary concepts, Sartori (1984, p. 41) suggests that researchers wanting to define a concept should “first collect a representative set of definitions; second, extract their characteristics; and third, construct matrixes that organise such characteristics meaningfully.” Since there were no formal definitions in the literature for distance learners’ personal and professional life-contexts or life-context interactions, I adapted this advice and compiled a list of 33 ostensive definitions from the literature located during the process of labelling the concept. I then separated each ostensive definition into its constituent parts and organised and compared these using a matrix to identify the defining attributes.

From this analysis, four defining attributes emerged for the concept of distance learners’ personal and professional life-contexts:
Chapter 4: Conceptualising Life-Context Interactions

- home life, involving their immediate and extended family members;

- social life, involving their close friends and acquaintances;

- community life, involving members of the local and international communities and networks to which they belong; and

- professional life, involving their immediate work colleagues, managers and organisational leaders, as well as their wider network of industry peers and professional associates.

Using these four attributes I developed the following definition:

**Personal and professional life-context — Working definition**

The everyday personal and professional lives of distance learners that comprise four spheres: their home life involving their immediate and extended family members; their social life involving their friends and acquaintances; their community life involving the members of the local and international communities and networks to which they belong; and their professional life involving their work colleagues, managers and organisational leaders as well as their wider network of industry peers and professional associates.

When I began developing a working definition for the associated term ‘life-context interactions’, I found I needed to determine whether to include the stipulation that these interactions be about ‘the academic content’ of distance learners’ studies. After rereading the work of Sartori (1984), I came to understand that this stipulation was an accompanying or variable property of the concept, rather than a defining one, because these interactions could be about other things related to a distance learner’s studies, and not just the academic content. I further found that Sartori (1984) offered the following very clear advice on the treatment of accompanying properties: “…no accompanying property [should be] included among the necessary defining properties” (p. 56). “Their presence must be ascertained by investigation — not declared to exist by definition” (p. 55). Based on this advice, I excluded the stipulation and developed the following working definition for the term life-context interactions:
Life-context interactions — Working definition

Interactions occurring between distance learners and other people in their personal and professional lives about their studies, including their immediate and extended family members, their friends and acquaintances, the members of the local and international communities and networks to which they belong, their work colleagues, managers and organisational leaders, and their wider network of industry peers and professional associates.

These working definitions informed the exploration phase of this study but will be returned to and reconsidered in Chapter 9.

4.4 Summary

There is no standard term in the literature for the phenomenon of distance learners’ personal and professional lives. Instead, conceptual synonymy abounds with at least 40 different terms being used to express this idea. This chapter has described how I first came to notice this situation and recognise that it was inhibiting my capacity to think about this and other related ideas. It explained the process through which I developed the proposed conceptual label of ‘life-context’ for this phenomenon, as well as working definitions for this and the related concept of ‘life-context interactions’. However, the value of a disciplinary concept lies not in its mere existence but rather in its capacity to further disciplinary knowledge and practice. This issue is explored in the next chapter through an examination of how this concept fits within and might contribute to distance education research, theory and practice.
Chapter 5: Locating the Concept in the Literature

… even if a concept appears to represent some phenomenon in reality, such existence in itself does not render the concept of high relevance to practice. That is, there must also be a good reason to believe that the introduction of the concept into […] discourse can aid in meeting — at some level — the practice aims of the […] discipline. (Walker & Avant, 2011, p. 219)

From the early stages of this project, one of my key concerns was to discern whether the concept of distance learners’ life-context interactions is of any real significance to distance education research, theory and practice. As Walker and Avant (2011) and Toulmin (1972, p. 226) observe, an emergent disciplinary concept is unlikely to gain acceptance unless it can be shown to help resolve an existing disciplinary problem or open new avenues of research and practice that are valued by others. As a precursor to addressing the fifth research question, which considers this issue, this chapter explores the potential value of the concept of life-context interactions by locating it in the literature related to distance education research, theory and practice. It discusses and critiques:

1. The scope and nature of the existing research related to the general concept of distance learners’ personal and professional life-contexts.

2. The evidence that can be found in the literature of the more specific concept of distance learners’ life-context interactions.

3. The way in which the concept of distance learners’ life-context interactions might relate to existing theories and models of interaction in distance education.

5.1 Research related to distance learners’ life-contexts

Despite there being no agreed term in the literature for the concept of distance learners’ personal and professional life-contexts, there is a body of research related to the concept that broadly divides into four categories: research that documents the general characteristics of distance learners and their personal and professional life-contexts; research that investigates the ways in which these life-contexts influence distance learners’ propensity to successfully complete their study programs; research that explores the means through which distance learners integrate their studies into their life-contexts; and
research that explores the specific ways in which distance learners’ life-contexts both affect, and are affected by, their enrolment in work-related study programs. This section discusses and critiques each of these in turn.

5.1.1 General characteristics of distance learners and their life-contexts

In the general literature on distance learners in advanced industrialised nations, little attempt is made to draw any distinction between those enrolled in undergraduate programs and those enrolled in postgraduate coursework programs. Instead, composite descriptions portray both types of learners as predominantly working adults aged between 25 and 45 who have busy, established lives and are studying part-time to improve or upgrade their vocational skills and knowledge (Kirkwood & Price, 2005; Peters, 2008; Moore & Kearsley, 2012). They may be physically and psychologically separated from their educational provider and the other learners in their program, but they typically have strong connections with other people in their life-contexts, such as family, friends, work colleagues and community members, which they seek to maintain whilst studying (Gibson, 1998; Gillis, Jackson, Braid, MacDonald & MacQuarrie, 2000; Scott, 2007). Their primary identity derives from their life-context, rather than the learning context, and while they value education, they are rarely able to make it their highest priority due to work and family commitments (Gibson, 1998; Grepperud, Rønning & Støkken, 2005; Kirkwood & Price, 2005). Their choice to study by distance education often reflects this, because it enables them to fit their studies around their life-contexts rather than vice versa (Bates, 2005; Kirkwood & Price, 2005; Moore & Kearsley, 2012).

Given the priority that distance learners of all kinds tend to accord to their life-contexts, it is somewhat surprising how few studies in the literature go beyond demographic statistics or pithy quotes and present rich depictions of distance learners and their life-contexts. Notable exceptions include Grace’s (1991) case study of the interactions between the personal contexts of distance learners enrolled in Australian undergraduate and postgraduate programs and their experiences of off-campus study and higher education institutional culture; Farnes’ (1992) life course analysis of the interrelationships between the various dimensions of British distance learners’ lives and their engagement in community education; Evans’ (1994) narrative inquiry into the various dimensions of Australian and Welsh distance learners’ broader lives that exert influence on their studies;
Eastmond’s (1995) multi-method qualitative study of distance learners enrolled in undergraduate programs at a United States college during the early years of public access to the Internet; and Dickie’s (1999) phenomenological study of the lived experience of three distance learners enrolled in postgraduate programs at Canadian universities. For the most part, however, the characteristics of distance learners and their life-contexts tend to be either described in general terms only, or portrayed using statistical analyses with the learner’s voice muted or absent (see for example Halsne & Gatta, 2002; Tucker, 2003; Bocchi, Owens & Swift, 2004; Stewart, Bachman & Johnson, 2010; Cao & Sakchutchawan, 2011). This is consistent with a more general paucity of studies in the field of online and distance education in which the learners’ voices and experiences shine through (Sharpe, Benfield, Lessner & DeCicco, 2005). By using a phenomenological research approach, this study aims to contribute a rich depiction of the life-contexts of postgraduate coursework distance learners that will complement and add to the limited number of other such depictions in the literature.

5.1.2 Influence of distance learners’ life-contexts on program completions

A second group of studies has moved beyond description and investigated the different ways in which the characteristics and life-contexts of distance learners influence their propensity to either successfully complete or withdraw from distance education programs (for example Kember, 1989; 1995; 1999; Powell, Conway & Ross, 1990; Carr et al., 1996, Vergidis & Panagiotakopoulos, 2002; Castles, 2004). Many of these studies have been informed by Tinto’s (1975) model of dropout from campus-based higher education courses, which emphasises the importance of facilitating the social and academic integration of school leavers into the fabric of campus life. However, the fabric of campus life had little relevance for distance learners, so Kember (1989) reconceptualised this idea and suggested that an important influence on distance learners’ persistence and success was the degree to which they were able to integrate the demands of their studies with their existing work, family and social lives. In a subsequent study of distance learners in Papua New Guinea, Australia and Hong Kong, Kember (1995; 1999) found that distance learners’ family, employers and work colleagues tend to either promote or inhibit this integration process through their attitudes towards negotiating changes and making sacrifices to accommodate the distance learner’s study needs. While Kember’s resulting model of student progress has been criticised for being methodologically flawed (Woodley, de-
Lange & Tanewski, 2001), for failing to explain the process through which social integration is achieved (Hunter, 2007), for conflating the concepts of social integration and temporal integration, and for underestimating the complexity of achieving temporal integration (Scott, 2007), his general point regarding the importance of distance learners’ integrating their studies into their life-contexts is nevertheless accepted and is supported by findings made in a wide range of studies over several decades including those by Holt, Petzall and Viljoen (1990), Holt (1992), Eastmond (1995), Asbee and Simpson (1998), Murphy and Yum (1998), Gillis et al. (2000), Vergidis and Panagiotakopoulos (2002), Grepperud, Rønning and Støkken (2005), Hunter (2007), and Maor and Volet (2007). For the most part, however, the process of integration is conceptualised as involving the learner seeking affective support for their studies from people in their life-contexts rather than any form of academic guidance or input. This study challenges this notion by exploring whether distance learners enrolled in postgraduate coursework programs are interacting with people in their life-contexts about their studies in ways that actively contribute to their academic learning rather than simply making it easier for them to study.

5.1.3 Distance learners’ approaches to integrating their studies into their life-contexts

A third group of studies has explored the strategies and processes through which distance learners actually achieve the integration of their studies into their life-contexts. While studies by Murphy and Yum (1998) and Östlund (2005) revealed no discernible patterns, a longitudinal qualitative study by Haythornthwaite and Kazmer has proved more illuminating (Kazmer, 2000; Kazmer & Haythornthwaite, 2001; Haythornthwaite & Kazmer, 2002). Focusing on distance learners enrolled in an online masters program in library and information science at a United States university, the study uncovered distinct patterns of behaviour and identified the process through which successful distance learners moved from juggling the demands of the new online learning context with those in their existing life-context, to achieving a level of integration and synergy whereby these two contexts began to blend together and what was learned in one was able to be used in the other (Kazmer & Haythornthwaite, 2001). During a similar period, Wiesenberg (2001) explored the coping strategies of predominantly female working professionals enrolled in an online Canadian postgraduate program in nursing as they struggled to integrate their new role as a learner into their existing personal and professional life-contexts. The experiences and
strategies she uncovered were somewhat different to those described by Holt (1992) in a much earlier study of predominantly male working professionals enrolled in an Australian MBA program delivered by distance education. More recently, Wozniak, Mahony, Lever and Pizzica (2009) have developed an approach to orientation for online postgraduate coursework learners that recognises the importance of this transition and integration process and helps learners to move through it in a staged manner. On a different theme, Raddon (2007) explored the issue of gender in her survey of British postgraduate distance learners and found that women’s continued domestic responsibilities provide them with distinct challenges in trying to juggle home, work and study. Zembylas (2008) made a similar finding in his study of adult learners’ emotions in online learning, and Hunter (2007) used a combination of role theory and a narrative case study approach to explore the effectiveness of different coping strategies used by seven women in the United States as they tried to integrate their new role as online learners into their existing life-contexts. Around the same time, Scott (2007) used grounded theory to uncover the temporal conflicts and challenges faced by online learners enrolled in British postgraduate programs as they tried to integrate courses designed around collaborative learning into their existing structured life-contexts. More recently, Kahu, Stephens, Zepke & Leach (2014) investigated the temporal and spatial strategies used by mature-aged undergraduate distance learners in New Zealand as they integrated their studies into their complex lives.

In common with the previous group of studies discussed earlier in this section, each of these studies focus predominantly on how successful integration enables learners to gain affective support for their studies from people in their life-contexts and pay little or no attention to the possibility that integration might also enable them to gain academic guidance or input. By exploring this latter possibility, this study has the capacity to either challenge or affirm the way in which distance learners’ approaches to integration are conceptualised in the literature.

5.1.4 Interrelationships between distance learners’ life-contexts and work-related study programs

A final group of studies has explored the specific ways in which the life-contexts of distance learners enrolled in work-related programs both affect, and are affected by, their studies. Using community of practice frameworks and interpretive approaches, Stacey, Smith and
Barty (2004), Conrad (2008) and Mackey (2009; 2010) have each explored the connections, tensions and synergies between online learning communities and workplace communities of practice with participants studying work-related programs in Australia, Canada and New Zealand respectively. Stacey, Smith and Barty (2004) found that while some participants undertaking a Master of Education program struggled to find links between the online learning community and their workplace community of practice, others were able to exploit synergies between the two in a way that benefited both. Such benefits included enhancements to participants’ thinking skills, leadership skills and capacity to design learning programs and formulate business proposals, although none of these things were documented in detail. Key factors identified as influencing these synergies included the degree of linkage between each participant’s work and studies, the level of support they received from their employer and the extent to which the design and structure of the program they were studying encouraged them to explore work-related linkages. Any interactions participants had with their colleagues as a result of these synergies, however, were not recorded or explored. In a more in-depth study of the connections and learning transferences between an online learning community and professional communities of practice, Mackey (2009; 2010) found that participants undertaking a postgraduate program in education were sharing knowledge gained from their studies with their work colleagues and involving them in study-related research projects. Through these interactions participants were introducing new practices and ideas to their colleagues and reinforcing and extending their own learning. While the study did not examine in detail the learning contributions made by these interactions, it did conclude that such interactions had the capacity to enhance the learning of professionals and should be encouraged as part of the intentional design of study programs targeting these learners.

In a slightly different vein, Conrad (2008) studied adult learners enrolled in a range of different programs and found they engaged in a moderate number of learning-related conversations with their work colleagues, family, friends and acquaintances as part of a conscious effort to seek and create supporting structures for themselves outside the formal learning environment. While Conrad did not document these interactions in any detail or investigate how they contributed to participants’ learning, her findings nevertheless support Gibson’s (1998) earlier speculation that distance learners might be able to leverage the expertise of people in their life-contexts to assist them with their studies. Creanor, Trinder,
Gowan and Howells (2006) have more recently suggested that the ability to engage in such networking and to build personal support structures is one of the key characteristics of successful online learners. Other instances of this behaviour have been identified by Orey, Koenecke and Crozier (2003), Kazmer (2005) and Saumure (2010). Writing about this phenomenon, Kazmer (2005) coined the term ‘community-embedded learning’ to describe situations where professionals enrol in job-related online programs that enable them to remain located in, and strongly connected to, their communities, families and workplaces. She further described five different types of transfer that occur between the online learning community and the learners’ personal and professional life-contexts and proposed approaches that might be used to leverage these transfers and improve learning outcomes. Like Kazmer, Mackey (2010) also proposed a set of program design principles aimed at facilitating and capitalising on the transference of knowledge and ideas between online learning communities and professional communities of practice. She further supported a shift in the definition of blended learning as proposed by Oliver and Trigwell (2005) and suggested it might be reconceptualised to encompass the blending of online interactions amongst members of a formal learning community with face-to-face interactions amongst professional colleagues beyond the reach of the program.

Unlike the previous two groups of studies described in this section, this final group of studies explores and affirms the possibility that distance learners enrolled in work-related study programs may be gaining both academic and affective support for their studies from people in their life-contexts. However, none of these studies systematically explore the learning contributions that distance learners gain when they interact with people in their life-contexts to obtain such support. This study seeks to make a contribution in this regard.

5.2 Research related to distance learners’ life-context interactions

As indicated in the previous section, even though there is no agreed term in the literature for the concept of distance learners’ life-context interactions, there is a body of research that makes mention of these types of interactions. This section discusses this literature and critiques the reasons for the lack of attention paid to this phenomenon.
5.2.1 Evidence of distance learners’ life-context interactions

Intermittently in the literature discussed in this and the previous chapter, brief mention is made of interactions that occur between distance learners and other people in their personal and professional life-contexts that are directly related to their learning. These include both formal and informal discussions with work colleagues, peers, managers or leaders within their organisation or wider industry (Eastmond, 1995, Dickie, 1999; Taplin & Jegede, 2001; Orey, Koenecke & Crozier, 2003; Conole, de Laat, Dillon & Darby 2006; Hunter, 2007; Conrad, 2008; Mackey, 2010; Saumure, 2010), casual discussions with immediate and extended family members (Grace, 1991; Eastmond, 1995; Dickie, 1999; Gillis et al., 2000; Östlund, 2005; Creanor, Trinder, Gowan & Howells, 2006; Hunter, 2007; Conrad, 2008; Saumure, 2010) or close friends and acquaintances (Grace, 1991; Eastmond, 1995; Dickie, 1999; Kember, 1999; Orey, Koenecke & Crozier, 2003; Creanor et al., 2006; Hunter, 2007; Conrad, 2008), and appeals for help or advice made to professionals and other experts in their broader communities and networks (Juler, 1990; Saumure, 2010). However, none of these studies systematically document or explore these interactions in any depth, but instead mention them as an incidental part of a project focusing on some other aspect of distance learning.

5.2.2 Reasons for the lack of focus on distance learners’ life-context interactions

There appear to be two key reasons for this lack of explicit focus in the literature on distance learners’ life-context interactions. First, there is a tendency for distance education researchers to restrict their attention to the three elements of all formal learning contexts—learners, teachers and content. Perhaps the most prominent example of this is the composition of the dominant model of interaction modes in distance education developed by Anderson (2003b) based on the work of Moore (1989) and Anderson and Garrison (1998), which will be discussed in detail in the next section. This situation is consistent with Toulmin’s (1972) observation that a discipline’s activities are framed by its concepts and these determine the ways in which the discipline’s problems are tackled. One exception has been American researcher Chère Campbell Gibson who has consistently advocated that more attention be paid to distance learners’ broader life-contexts (Gibson, 1998; 2003). In her key paper on the topic, Gibson (1998) draws upon Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) description of ecological systems theory to depict distance learners as embedded within a
series of intersecting contexts or systems that significantly influence their studies. These include workplace, family and classroom microsystems, the mesosystem of interactions between these microsystems, the exosystem of larger social structures such as government, industry, the mass media and religion, and the overarching cultural macrosystem of social, economic, legal and political systems that shapes each society.

Gibson argues that these wider life-contexts should be acknowledged in distance education theory and embraced as a partner in the learning process because they often contain a rich array of learning resources including work colleagues and community members with subject matter expertise (Gibson, 1998; 2003). While this latter message is congruent with the trend towards designing authentic learning and assessment tasks that are based around learners' life-contexts, Gibson's ideas in this regard are not widely cited in the literature. Distance learners' life-contexts also continue to be excluded from key theories and models, a topic that will be discussed in detail in the next section of this chapter.

Second, there is a tendency for distance education researchers to argue that it is beyond the ability of institutions to influence aspects of distance learners' idiosyncratic life-contexts and that it is ultimately the responsibility of distance learners to integrate their studies into their lives (Kember, 1989; 1999; Anderson, 2003b). This is consistent with Toulmin's (1972, p. 175) further observation that every discipline has phenomena that it has yet to contend with because its researchers cannot find a promising line of inquiry. The unfortunate subtext, whether intended or not, is that participation in education continues to be construed as ideally “a separate activity, distinct from work and family life: students are expected to eschew, or at least forget about, such roles when they take on the mantle of learning” (Tight, 1998, p. 257). This artificial separation between life-context and study is unrealistic, especially when applied to the increasing numbers of working professionals who are enrolling in professionally-oriented postgraduate coursework programs and tend to perceive work and learning as interconnected (Forsyth et al., 2009; Todhunter, 2009; Thomas, Day & Hegarty, 2014). It is also incompatible with the emerging notion that a symbiotic relationship between life and study is central to good educational practice (Taylor, 2009). As knowledge evolves, Toulmin (1972, p. 174) has suggested that the explanations that satisfied one generation of researchers do not necessarily satisfy the next. With the rationale crumbling for sidelining exploration of distance learners' life-context
interactions, it seems an opportune time to open this ‘black box’ and find out what lies within.

5.3 Theories and models of interaction in distance education

In the disciplinary field of distance education, one of the key topics of conceptual and theoretical development has been the different theories and modes of interaction and the implications of these for teaching and learning. This section discusses and critiques the literature surrounding these matters and explores how the concept of distance learners' life-context interactions might contribute to the development of these.

5.3.1 Theories of interaction in distance education

Interaction has long been considered an integral part of learning because it enables learners to actively engage with new pieces of information and transform them into meaningful knowledge (Dewey, 1916). While definitions of interaction abound (see, for example, Wagner, 1994), it can be usefully considered as the reciprocal actions of two or more actors within a given context (Vrasidas, 1999, p. 33). In both face-to-face and distance education, the main actors said to be involved in interactions are learners, their teachers and the educational materials. However, in distance education a significant proportion of these interactions are mediated by some form of technology (Saba, 1988; Shale & Garrison, 1990), such as computer and telecommunications technologies, broadcast media, audio-visual media or printed material. There is also a greater likelihood that a good number of these interactions will take place asynchronously, rather than synchronously, and will be planned, designed and consciously acted upon (Peters, 2010, p. 85), which means there is less opportunity for the natural spontaneity that sometimes occurs in face-to-face classroom conversations (Li, 2002).

Amongst distance education theorists there has been considerable argument about the relative learning contribution of each type of interaction as part of a larger, longstanding debate about how distance education programs might best be designed to ‘get the mixture right’ between facilitating interaction and independent study (Daniel & Marquis, 1979). Within this debate, Holmberg (1983; 1986; 2005; 2007) has been a strong advocate of the value of asynchronous monologic interactions between learners and written learning content that is presented in an engaging, conversational style to facilitate what he refers to
as ‘empathetic teaching-learning conversations’. Garrison (1989; 1993), on the other hand, has been a long-time advocate of the value of both synchronous and asynchronous dialogic interactions between learners, teachers and other learners, which underpin the online community of inquiry framework he has developed with his associates over the past fifteen years (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 1999; Garrison & Akyol, 2013) based in part on the ideas of Lipman (1991). Sitting somewhere between the two, Anderson (2003a; 2008) has tended to place a more equal level of emphasis on the value of each of these types of interaction in view of the different needs and preferences he has observed amongst distance learners. This is reflected in the equivalency theorem he has proposed which suggests that deep and meaningful learning can occur provided that learners are engaging in high levels of at least one form of interaction (Anderson, 2003a; 2008). Occupying a slightly different middle position, Moore (2006; 2008) argues that even though dialogic interaction forms one of the three elements of his influential theory of transactional distance (Moore, 1973; 1993; 2013) and should always be considered when designing distance education programs, it is not the form of interaction most valued by distance learners, who instead have been shown to place greater import on interacting with content (for example, Fung, 2004, Kear, 2004; Ke & Carr-Chellman, 2006). He further argues that it is not inherently better for learners to engage in high levels of dialogic interaction but rather depends on the nature of the learning objectives for any given program. The differing views expressed by Holmberg, Garrison, Anderson and Moore represent different epistemological beliefs about how knowledge is constructed. Garrison seems to favour what is commonly referred to as a social constructivist view in which knowledge is thought to be primarily constructed socially through interpersonal interaction (Swan, 2005). By contrast, Holmberg, and perhaps also Moore, seem to favour what Swan (2005) terms a cognitive constructivist view in which knowledge is thought to be primarily constructed individually through intrapersonal cognition. Anderson, on the other hand, seems to embrace both views but privileges neither.

The epistemological beliefs of educators influence the way they design distance learning programs and this has given rise to two broad design approaches that each privilege different forms of interaction and have different strengths and weaknesses (Haughey, Evans & Murphy, 2008). Distance education programs and courses designed using social constructivist pedagogy tend to involve paced, collaborative learning that requires learners
to engage in high levels of text, audio or video-based dialogic interaction with each other and their teachers as a means of exposing them to multiple perspectives and helping them engage in critical discourse and negotiate common understandings of program content (Anderson, 2008; Haughey, Evans & Murphy, 2008; Anderson & Dron, 2011). Such designs promote the development of social skills, collaboration and interdependent learning within a community of inquiry, as well as supportive personal relationships between learners and a sense of belonging to a virtual learning group (Anderson, 2003a; 2008). The requirement for learners to interact with each other regularly, however, binds them together in time, even where such interaction is generally asynchronous rather than synchronous (Anderson, 2003a; 2006; 2008). This constrains their ability to study when and where they wish and conflicts with the tendency for some learners to deliberately choose distance education as a way of integrating study into their structured lives by avoiding the temporal constraints associated with extensive interpersonal interaction (Anderson, 2003a; 2008; Scott, 2007; Liu, 2008). Studies of distance learners enrolled in postgraduate coursework programs suggest this may be a common issue for these learners, who sometimes admit they consciously trade-off interaction with other learners for flexibility of time, place and pace of study, even though they are aware such interactions might enhance their learning experience (Hatch, 2002; Motteram & Forrester, 2005; Su, Bonk, Magjuka & Lee, 2005; Watson, 2009). By contrast, distance education programs and courses designed using cognitive constructivist principles tend to involve flexible, independent study that requires learners to engage in high levels of asynchronous monologic interaction with information-rich resources designed to facilitate meaning-making and help them develop individual understandings of program content (Anderson, 2003a; 2008; Haughey, Evans & Murphy, 2008). Such designs free learners to study when and where they wish and promote the development of individual cognition, investigative research skills and independent learning. However, since they do not require learners to interact with each other regularly, they do not foster the formation of supportive personal relationships, expose learners to multiple perspectives or encourage them to engage in critical discourse and negotiate meaning (Anderson, 2008).

Anderson (2003a; 2008) argues that neither of these design approaches can meet the needs of all learners or courses, and the schematic model he has developed to illustrate the components of each of these approaches presents both as equally valid. A notable
feature of both approaches and the surrounding theoretical discourse is, however, that they focus almost exclusively on the interactions and activities that occur within the formal distance learning context and generally marginalise or ignore the interplay with the world beyond. This is despite both Garrison (1993) and Anderson (2003b) having acknowledged the possibility that distance learners may be interacting with other people in their personal and professional lives about their studies in a way that is making a positive contribution to their learning, with Garrison suggesting that it might be worth investigating these interactions at some point and perhaps incorporating them into relevant distance education theories and models. His suggestion has never been acted upon, however, and the only way in which other people in distance learners’ life-contexts are currently acknowledged in the two approaches described above is as a peripheral source of learning assistance and support, but not of interaction. This has the inadvertent effect of presenting a design approach that leverages virtual communities of inquiry, but not one that leverages real-world communities of practice. It also provides a role and a place in the learning process for distance learners’ interactions with people who are what Meijas (2005) describes as physically and epistemologically distant from them as they develop new knowledge and skills, but not for their interactions with people who are physically and epistemologically near to them as they integrate their new knowledge and skills into their personal and professional lives. This problem is indirectly noted in Swan’s (2005) discussion of the growing importance attached to the design of community-centred learning environments, which she suggests can be understood in two ways: first, as involving the development of virtual learning communities, for which there is a well-developed body of literature; and second, as involving the development of connections to distance learners’ real-world communities and contexts, for which there are fewer studies and guidelines. Given the emergence of integration skills as a category of significant learning that enhances learner engagement, it seems time for this anomaly to be given more thought and attention.

A rare example of a distance education design approach that acknowledges and makes use of distance learners’ life-context interactions is the community-embedded learning approach developed by Kazmer (2005; 2007). Based on the understanding that learners undertaking online postgraduate coursework programs in library and information science tend to remain physically located in their existing communities and maintain strong ties to people in their personal and professional life-contexts, this design approach seeks to
leverage these ties and encourage a two-way exchange of knowledge between the learners' life-contexts and the learning context. Drawing upon the sociological concepts of embeddedness (Granovetter, 1985) and strong and weak ties in interpersonal networks (Granovetter, 1973; 1983), community-embedded learning encourages learners to engage in online interactions with a virtual community of learners as well as real-world interactions with people in their personal and professional life-contexts as a means of sharing and transferring ideas and experiences from one context to the other. Community-embedded learning is underpinned by both cognitive constructivist and social-constructivist views of knowledge construction, with learners required to complete individual projects that are grounded in real-world contexts, draw upon and are informed by the views of others and lead to both individual and collective understandings of program content. It is therefore associated with social learning benefits such as the development of social skills and supportive personal relationships between learners, individual learning benefits such as the development of individual cognition, and practical learning benefits through the application of knowledge to real-world contexts. Community-embedded learning shares some similarity with the situated learning design for online environments developed by Oliver and Herrington (2000) based significantly on the work of Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989). A key element that sets community-embedded learning apart is the way in which it explicitly aims to leverage people and resources beyond the formal learning context, where Oliver and Herrington's situated learning design does not. Community-embedded learning has been recognised in research into the delivery of online programs in library and information science (for example, Saumure, 2010; Most, 2011). However, it has attracted only limited attention in the broader sphere of distance education research and is not currently acknowledged in the main theoretical discourses.

As an alternative to the constructivist theories of learning discussed above, Siemens (2005) has proposed a new theory called connectivism, which suggests that in the modern networked world in which knowledge is abundant, distributed and rapidly changing, a critical element of the learning process is the capacity to make, nurture and leverage connections between people, ideas and concepts. Siemens’ conceptualisation of connectivism draws upon chaos theory and network theory and seems to centre largely upon capitalising on the affordances of technology-mediated connections between learners within a formal online learning community rather than the natural connections between
learners and other people in the world beyond the learning community. While it has attracted a great deal of attention in the literature and has been used to underpin the development of connectivist Massive Open Online Courses (cMOOCs) (see for example Kop, 2011; Siemens, 2013), it has also been criticised for under-conceptualising interaction (Clarà & Barberà, 2014) and its status and value as a learning theory has been questioned (Ally, 2008; Kop & Hill, 2008). For this thesis it offers some interesting ideas and perspectives but its lack of focus on connections beyond the formal learning context mean it does not offer a theoretical basis for alternative educational designs.

### 5.3.2 Models of interaction modes in distance education

In an attempt to develop a commonly agreed way of describing the main modes of interaction occurring in distance education, Moore (1989) proposed the following terms and definitions:

**Learner–Content Interaction**: Cognitive interaction between the distance learner and the subject matter being studied which may take the form of an internal conversation. For education to occur, Moore argued that Learner–Content interaction must take place.

**Learner–Instructor Interaction**: Interpersonal interaction between the distance learner and an educator responsible for teaching the subject matter. Sometimes this is in the form of direct interactions that are either mediated by telecommunications technologies or occur face-to-face during residential classes. Other times it is in the form of what Holmberg (1983) originally referred to as indirect ‘guided didactic conversations’ and now refers to as empathetic ‘teaching–learning conversations’ (Holmberg, 2003) that are mediated through pre-prepared study materials using various technologies.

**Learner–Learner Interaction**: Interpersonal interaction between distance learners about their studies, with or without an instructor present. Most commonly these interactions are mediated by telecommunications technologies but sometimes they occur face-to-face during residential classes or private study groups.

In the 25 years since Moore proposed these terms and definitions, the rapid spread of satellite and Internet technologies has increased the visibility and prominence of two other
forms of learner interactions which has led researchers to propose the following additions to Moore’s taxonomy:

**Learner–Interface Interaction:** The cognitive and physical interaction between a distance learner and the technological interface that mediates their interaction with content, teachers or other learners (Hillman, Willis & Gunawardena, 1994). This includes computer technologies, telecommunications technologies and audio-visual technologies, as well as textbooks and printed study materials.

**Vicarious Interaction:** The interaction that takes place when a distance learner observes and actively processes interactions between other learners, or between teachers and other learners, but does not personally participate in them (Sutton, 2000). Vicarious interaction is commonly associated with online distance learning but can also occur when distance learners attend face-to-face residential classes.

In the United States, satellite technology also gave rise to learner–environment interaction, defined as the interaction between a distance learner and their surroundings at a remote teleconference site (Walden, 1997). Outside the United States teleconferencing has not been a common mode of distance education delivery and it is referred to only rarely as a mode of interaction in the literature.

Moving beyond those forms of interaction that involve learners, Mortera-Gutierrez (2002) studied the interactions of distance education instructors using three different delivery models at a United States university and identified the following seven modes of interaction: instructor–learner interaction, instructor–content interaction, instructor–technology interaction, instructor–remote site facilitator interaction, instructor–peer interaction, instructor–support staff interaction and instructor–institution interaction. Unfortunately, he did not formally define any of these interaction modes and his research appears to have attracted only limited attention. His research nevertheless highlighted the critical roles played by interface interactions and support staff interactions in facilitating distance education delivery as well as interactions with learners and content. Mortera-Gutierrez also astutely observed that each actor in the distance education process engaged in different modes of interaction, and that for these to be properly understood researchers needed to view the process from the perspective of multiple actors.
During a similar time period, Anderson (2003b) separately identified and defined three modes of interaction involving actors other than learners, based on the work of Anderson and Garrison (1998). These are listed below and include two of the interaction modes identified by Mortera-Gutierrez (2002) along with one that is new. Anderson additionally replaced the term ‘instructor’ with ‘teacher’ in keeping with the general shift away from behaviourist pedagogies.

Teacher–Content Interaction: The intellectual interaction that occurs as the teacher selects the subject matter to be studied and develops this into educational content designed for distance learners.

Teacher–Teacher Interaction: Professional interactions between teachers about their subject matter and about distance education delivery. Sometimes these interactions occur face-to-face, other times they are mediated by telecommunications technologies.

Content–Content Interaction: Interaction between intelligent computer programs and electronic sources of educational content made possible by the development of the Internet.

Anderson (2003a; 2003b) developed a schematic model of some of these interaction modes that is widely cited and discussed in the distance education literature. In it he chose not to include either learner–interface interaction or vicarious interaction, arguing that each is a component of the other modes of interaction rather than a distinct mode in itself. He also acknowledged the possibility of interactions between distance learners and other people in their broader life-contexts, but excluded these from his model arguing that they are too complex and idiosyncratic and not of the same quality or value as those interactions that occur within the formal education context.

In a recent version of Anderson’s model of interaction modes shown in Figure 5.1, Anderson and Kuskis (2007) added two further modes, the second of which was identified earlier by Mortera-Gutierrez (2002):

Learner–Institution Interaction: Interactions between distance learners and the non-academic areas of educational institutions, such as student services, the IT help desk and the library.
Chapter 5: Locating the Concept in the Literature

**Teacher–Institution Interaction**: Interactions between distance educators and the non-academic areas of educational institutions, such as student services, other administrative areas, information technology services and the library.

![Diagram of interaction modes in distance education](image)

**Figure 5.1: Modes of interaction in distance education (based on Anderson & Kuskis, 2007)**

Friesen and Kuskis (2013) have since removed reference to content–content interactions from their revision of this book chapter, and they have also notably omitted to include the model of modes of interaction at all. This suggests that there may be an emerging sense of dissatisfaction with the model, a situation that Kuhn (1996, p. 92) argued precedes the overturning of dominant paradigms.

Like most forms of pictorial representation, models are subjective and political because they reflect the views, biases and concerns of their creators. Anderson’s model is no exception and reflects his view as a distance education teacher and theorist with an interest in exploring the various interactions that occur within the formal distance education context. His model does not, however, reflect a distance learner’s perspective because it depicts, and seems to give equal emphasis to, three types of interactions that neither involve nor are visible to them (teacher–content interaction, teacher–teacher interaction and content–content interaction), while simultaneously omitting reference to their life-contexts and any learning interactions they may be having in this realm. Anderson (2003b)
admits that this simplifies reality but does not provide any evidence to support his claims regarding their complexity, idiosyncrasy, quality and value. This is reminiscent of Kuhn’s (1996) observation that disciplinary communities tend to discourage investigation of problems that do not fit within an accepted paradigm by suggesting that they are “just too problematic to be worth the time” (p. 37). Anderson’s (2003a) argument that the value of each interaction mode should be assessed in accordance with its contribution to the learning process also seems to have been applied inconsistently given his admission elsewhere (Anderson, 2003b) that not all of the interaction modes included in his model are strictly educational. His decision to exclude the interactions between distance learners and other people in their life-contexts thus appears to be based largely on opinion and untested assumptions and is open to question.

Anderson’s model is not the only attempt in the literature to graphically depict and make sense of the different modes of interaction in distance education. For example, building on the work of Hirumi (2002), Ally (2008) developed a hierarchical model of interaction modes in online learning that is depicted here in Figure 5.2. It shows how learners initially interact with the online interface in order to then access and interact with the unit content. As they progress through the unit they may subsequently interact with their teacher, other learners and external experts in order to access assistance and support. They will also ideally interact with their context as they apply the unit content to their lives and construct personal meaning. Ally’s model reflects a much more learner-oriented and learning-centred point of view than Anderson’s model and it notably includes reference to both learner–expert interaction and learner–context interaction, neither of which are included in Anderson’s model. Definitions are not provided for either of these additional interaction modes, however, and it is unclear from the accompanying discussion exactly to whom or what they are referring.
In addition to being subjective and political, models can also be powerful because they direct attention towards whatever contents they contain and away from whatever they do not. Given that ‘energy flows where attention goes’, it is perhaps unsurprising that while a solid body of knowledge has formed around the nature, interrelationships and learning contributions of the three modes of interaction common to both Anderson’s and Ally’s models — learner–content, learner–teacher and learner–learner — research surrounding distance learners’ life-context interactions remains limited. This is consistent with Kuhn’s (1996, p. 24) observation that a discipline’s research is generally directed toward exploring those phenomena that have already been labelled and incorporated into its existing theories and models and not toward those that are new or innovative. By proposing a conceptual label for this phenomenon and exploring its contribution to student learning, this research project thus has the capacity to not only add to the current knowledge base regarding the modes of interaction in distance education, but also focus attention and encourage more research into the various aspects and implications of this neglected phenomenon.

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**Figure 5.2: Levels of interaction in online learning (based on Ally, 2008)**

Learner–Interface Interaction

Learner–Content Interaction

Learner–Support Interaction

Learner–Learner Interaction

Learner–Teacher Interaction

Learner–Expert Interaction

Learner–Context Interaction
5.4 Summary

This chapter has explored the potential value and significance of the emergent concept of distance learners’ life-context interactions by critically reviewing the literature surrounding the concept and examining how it might fit within and contribute to the development of disciplinary research, theory and practice. The chapter began with a discussion of the scope and nature of the existing research related to the general concept of distance learners’ personal and professional life-contexts and highlighted the weaknesses and gaps in the literature that this study aims to address. It then presented evidence of research that makes mention of the more specific concept of distance learners’ life-context interactions and critiqued why this phenomenon has been seemingly overlooked. The chapter concluded with a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of existing theories and models of interaction in distance education and how the concept of distance learners’ life-context interactions potentially challenges and contributes to the development of these.

This chapter also concluded the discussion of the activities undertaken during the conceptualisation phase of this study. The next chapter provides an introduction to the exploration phase of the project by presenting an overview of the research participants who were interviewed about their experiences in engaging in life-context interactions while undertaking postgraduate coursework programs by distance education.
Chapter 6: Establishing the Exploratory Research Context

This chapter provides an introduction to the exploration phase of the study, which used the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) research approach described in Chapter 3 to explore the occurrence and learning contributions of life-context interactions amongst fourteen working professionals who were each studying a vocationally-oriented Australian postgraduate coursework program by distance education. In keeping with the idiographic focus of IPA, the chapter presents an introductory profile of each of the participants as well as a brief outline of each of the programs in which they were enrolled.

6.1 Introducing the research participants

The fourteen participants represented in this study include eight women and six men, one international student living in Australia and another living in Africa, two Australian expatriates living in Europe, teachers, managers, information technology professionals, an engineer and a mediator and counsellor. A brief introduction to each of the participants is included below to help contextualise the participants’ discussion of their experiences presented in the following chapters. This is accompanied by a participant summary presented in Table 6.1 at the conclusion of this section. To preserve the participants’ anonymity, pseudonyms have been used and other identifying details removed.

6.1.1 Alex

Alex is an Australian expatriate in his late 30s who is working in a managerial position in Europe. Not long before being interviewed for this study he had completed a Master of Business through distance study which he undertook partly in Australia and partly in Europe without attending any face-to-face residential schools or workshops. Prior to enrolling in the Master of Business, Alex had completed a number of vocational qualifications related to the call centre industry where he had pursued a career after leaving university without completing his undergraduate degree. He decided to pursue higher education as a means of broadening his career options and gaining intellectual stimulation.
When it hit me that I might be creating a family, I thought that it’d be nice if I could get some studies behind me and try and broaden my horizons in the workforce, and just to do something different apart from going to work, coming back home, and holding a long-distance relationship.

Alex began his studies with the approval and financial support of his Australian employer. He chose distance education as a means of fitting his studies around his work commitments after his employer indicated they were unwilling to allow him to vary his working hours so he could study on-campus.

I did ask, I did try to see if work would be okay with it, but of course they said no, so the only work-around that we had was to delve into distance education and find what the options are there.

Alex was interviewed twice by Skype with two-way video used throughout both interviews.

6.1.2 Ann

Ann is a general manager in her mid 40s who works for a multinational company located in a regional Australian city. Not long before being interviewed for this study she had completed a Master of Human Resource Management by distance study without attending any face-to-face residential schools or workshops. Ann decided to enrol in the Master of Human Resource Management primarily to advance her career but also to gain a degree of intellectual stimulation. She chose distance education because she travels extensively for work and was unable to commit to attending lectures at a university campus each week.

To go down the distance path suited me from a work point of view because I could do it in my own time and it met my work commitments. I suppose [that] was the main reason why I actually did it, because I travel with work all the time so I couldn’t actually go and do something where I had to commit myself to be at a university. […] Most of my studies are done on aeroplanes or in motel rooms [laughs]. It’s just suited my lifestyle really well.

Although Ann’s employer offered to pay for her studies, she decided to fund them herself because she didn’t want to feel tied to remaining with her current employer indefinitely. Ann was interviewed once by telephone.

6.1.3 Cameron

Cameron is an engineering professional in his mid 30s who works for a media company in an Australian capital city. When interviewed for this study he was completing his last
subject in a Master of Business Administration that he studied primarily by distance education but augmented by attending optional campus-based residential schools for several units. Cameron decided to pursue postgraduate study after he began working in an environment where a lot of his peers were studying and it became clear that to advance his career he needed to develop a range of business and management skills that would complement his existing technical vocational skills. He originally enrolled in a Master of Management (Information Technology) and self-funded his studies, but decided to change program after his employer recognised they were gaining benefit from his studies and offered to fund them.

[I said] 'are you interested in contributing, just with that little bit of extra leave or whatever', and they said 'look we’re happy to pay for you to study whatever you’d like', and in terms of that giving me value, that was a tremendous opportunity, and I said, 'well that being the case, I’d like to transfer into an MBA program next year'. So they’ve fully funded my study, which has been really amazing for me.

Cameron chose distance education in part because his work often requires him to travel making it impossible for him to commit to attending lectures at a university campus each week, and in part because he wanted to study at times that suited him and minimised the impact on his broader lifestyle. Cameron was interviewed once by telephone.

6.1.4 Charles

Charles is an information technology professional in his early 30s who works for a telecommunications company in Africa. He is enrolled as an international student in a Master of Systems and Network Administration that he is completing entirely by distance study without attendance at face-to-face residential schools or workshops. When interviewed for this study he was about one-third of the way through the program. Prior to enrolling in the Master of Systems and Network Administration, Charles had completed a diploma qualification and a range of industry certifications but did not have an undergraduate degree because it was deemed unnecessary by employers when he entered the IT industry. He decided to pursue higher education when attitudes in his industry changed, and began exploring options for studying while continuing to work.

…time has passed and now I’m 20-something and I don’t have a degree, I don’t have anything, and all of a sudden everyone is asking for a degree.
Charles chose this particular program because it enabled him to gain direct entry into a Masters program as well as credit for his industry certifications, thus making it possible for him to achieve his goal within a shorter and more realistic timeframe.

_I didn’t like [the thought of] investing all that time in just doing a degree, then eventually a Masters. So [this university] happened to come along and it was offering something that could really rescue me out of that situation._

Charles was also attracted to the subjects on offer because they seemed relevant to his work and likely to be of value. He has self-funded his studies and was interviewed twice by Skype, although connection difficulties meant only limited use could be made of video transmission on both occasions.

6.1.5 Clara

Clara is a human resources manager in her mid 30s who works for an IT company in an Australian capital city. She is undertaking a Master of Human Resource Management entirely by distance study without attendance at face-to-face residential schools or workshops. Prior to enrolling in this program, Clara had completed a professional diploma by distance education for which she was granted full credit. When interviewed for this study she was about two-thirds of the way through her Masters program. Clara decided to enrol in the Master of Human Resource Management primarily for intellectual stimulation, but also to help advance her career and to formalise and deepen the higher level knowledge and skills she had acquired from working in the human resources field for nearly fifteen years after deciding not to complete her undergraduate teaching degree.

...this just gives that extra theoretical level of knowledge for you to be able to rely on when you’re putting issues forward for resolution, or putting forward recommendations, or assisting managers to work in a different way — you can say well, all the research says this is best practice, and off you go. So it’s putting qualifications around my knowledge, but deepening that knowledge as well.

Clara considered a range of delivery options including on-campus evening courses, but she settled on distance education as the most practical way of fitting her studies around her work commitments. Although her employer is supportive of her studies, she has chosen to self-fund them for philosophical and personal reasons.
I'm a strong believer that this is my career and it's for me to be responsible for, and I don't ever want to be tied to a workplace because I would owe them money for study.

Clara was interviewed twice by telephone.

6.1.6 Deborah

Deborah is a mediator and counsellor in her early 60s who works for a social service agency in a regional Australian city. When interviewed for this study, Deborah had recently completed a Master of Ethics and Legal Studies entirely by distance study and was in the process of completing her first units in a Master of Arts (Pastoral Counselling) by distance study supplemented with compulsory attendance at regional residential schools for most units. In addition to these postgraduate qualifications she also holds a number of vocational qualifications in counselling and mediation and has undertaken many non-formal training courses. Deborah decided to enrol in the two Masters programs partly for intellectual stimulation but mostly to attain formal qualifications that would enable her to join relevant professional associations and provide employers and legal professionals with evidence of her knowledge and skills.

I had the training, but there was a kind of 'you're just qualified' attitude from the legal profession, and I found that I wanted something that made them think that I was on a level with them.

When she enrolled in the first program she was living in an outback town and distance education represented her only means of accessing postgraduate study. By the time she enrolled in the second program she had moved to a regional city with a university campus, but nevertheless chose distance education because it enabled her to fit her studies into her life without compromising her income and health.

I'm getting older, I'm 61 now, so I'm not the spring chicken that can do the 16 hours anymore in a day, I need my rest.

Deborah has self-funded her studies in part because her employment sector tends to fund non-formal rather than formal education and training. She was interviewed face-to-face at a mutually convenient location.
6.1.7 James

James is a database developer in his mid 30s who works in the IT industry in an Australian capital city. He is completing a Master of Systems Development entirely by distance education without attendance at face-to-face residential schools or workshops. When interviewed for this study he was about halfway through the program. Prior to enrolling in the Master of Systems Development, James had completed a range of industry certifications in addition to his double undergraduate degree. He decided to pursue postgraduate education in order to move beyond the treadmill of industry certifications and gain a higher qualification that might help him move into academia.

*I got certifications that basically expired 12 months afterwards, and it just seemed like a merry-go-round — so I figured this Masters level qualification would serve me better.*

After considering a campus-based program that involved driving a significant distance to attend a night class once a week, James chose distance education as a better and more flexible way of fitting his studies around his work and family commitments.

*I’m married with a job, three kids… Going back to full-time study was definitely not an option, but even any sort of variation on that would have been pretty tricky to do — if I had to give up a day of work a week that’s an even more significant drag on the funds.*

James has self-funded his studies and was interviewed once by telephone.

6.1.8 Janet

Janet is an executive assistant in her early 40s who works for a health service provider in a regional Australian city. She is completing a Master of Business Administration primarily by distance study but augmented with attendance at optional campus-based workshops for some units. When interviewed for this study she was more than two-thirds of the way through the program. Prior to enrolling in the Master of Business Administration, Janet had completed a range of related vocational qualifications but did not have an undergraduate degree. She decided to pursue higher education after changing jobs and realising she did not have a formal qualification that reflected the level of skills, knowledge and expertise she had acquired during her career.
I'd worked in a marketing environment, I had a marketing certificate, I originally started as a secretary and my position now is an Executive Assistant which [means] you do anything from some very minor things to some very major things. [...] I had all the abilities, but I didn’t have the formality side of it that people need to recognise or see.

Janet decided to enrol in this particular Masters program because it offered her entry without an undergraduate degree provided she first completed a nested Graduate Certificate and achieved a credit average. She was also attracted to the flexibility distance education offered in enabling her to fit her studies around her work, family and other commitments.

I have a very, very busy life, like most people, where we have one child, we both work full-time, we live on a farm, we both teach physical activities, and it was just a way that fits into your lifestyle.

Janet has self-funded her studies primarily because she did not want to feel tied to remaining with her current employer. She was interviewed once by telephone.

6.1.9 Kelly

Kelly is a relationship manager in her late 20s who works for a professional services firm in an Australian capital city. She is completing a Master of Business Administration primarily by distance study but augmented with attendance at optional city-based workshops for some units. When interviewed for this study she was more than halfway through her studies. A recent migrant from the United Kingdom, Kelly decided to enrol in the Master of Business Administration primarily to help her get a job in Australia after finding that the generalist structure of her undergraduate degree did not serve her well in the Australian job market. Prior to enrolling in the Master of Business Administration she had completed a professional diploma by distance education for which she was granted full credit. Kelly has self-funded her studies and was initially required to enrol as an international student. Although she would have preferred on-campus study, she chose distance education because it offered her the least expensive means of attaining a postgraduate qualification as well as the flexibility to fit her studies around her work commitments and to continue them in the event that she needed to return home to the United Kingdom.

The [diploma] course that I started with was a lot cheaper than any university modules, [...] and I just thought there’s going to be quite a lot of times where I can’t leave the office at 6 o’clock to go to a lecture, and the idea of going to a
Kelly was interviewed once by Skype, although connection difficulties meant that one-way video transmission was used for much of the interview, with Kelly able to see the interviewer but the interviewer unable to see Kelly.

6.1.10 Melissa

Melissa is a general manager in her mid 40s who works for a public sector organisation in an Australian capital city. She is completing a Master of Dispute Resolution by distance study supplemented with compulsory attendance at an on-campus residential school for one core unit. Not long before enrolling in the Master of Dispute Resolution, Melissa had completed a Master of Business Administration by distance education as well as updating an undergraduate degree. When interviewed for this study she was about halfway through her current program. Melissa originally enrolled in the Master of Dispute Resolution when she was working for another organisation and was looking for something that would complement and help her career, challenge her intellectually and keep her up-to-date.

I work in the people services / HR area, so it’s a perfect fit for me, and I’m right into alternative dispute resolution. […] I was in a role that I was comfortable in, [but] it wasn’t that challenging, so I find the challenge elsewhere, so that’s why I did the course.

She chose distance education because it enables her to study in a way that is time-efficient, flexible and limits her contact with other students.

…part of it is I don’t want to be sitting there listening to 600 questions. I want to get in, get what I’ve got to do, get out. Time is sooo valuable to me, I do phenomenally long hours, I’ve got so much on my plate. […] Plus, I can manage it myself — I decide when and where and it works brilliantly for me.

Melissa’s current employer has partially funded her studies because of the clear link to her work role and perceived benefit to the organisation. Melissa was interviewed once face-to-face at a mutually convenient location.

6.1.11 Natalie

Natalie is an ex-secondary teacher in her mid 30s who works in the higher education sector in regional Australia. When interviewed for this study she had recently completed a
Master of Business Administration by distance study which she had originally enrolled in while working in the secondary school sector. As part of the program she attended a number of workshops that were usually held at hotel conference facilities in a capital city. Having long harboured ambitions to pursue postgraduate study, Natalie decided to enrol in the Master of Business Administration after completing a career development program when she was working in a middle management role at a secondary school. She saw the qualification as offering her a means to develop her management skills in a way that would expand her career options both within and beyond the secondary school sector.

At the time I was also tossing up whether to actually get out of teaching, get out of schools, or run them. So it was kind of, I could get more background and develop skills in running for deputy principal or find a way to segue out of teaching. […] So for me, the program I chose, which in the end was the Master of Business Administration, sort of fitted in meeting both those potential best career directions.

Natalie lives in a regional town and considered distance education to be her only practical means of accessing postgraduate study.

I guess it was only ever going to be distance, I didn’t really have a choice of doing any other mode.

She self-funded her studies in large part through a long service leave payout she received early in the program. Natalie was interviewed twice by telephone.

6.1.12 Robert

Robert is an education professional in his mid 40s who teaches music at a school in Europe. He is completing a Doctor of Education by distance study supplemented with compulsory attendance at two on-campus residential schools. Prior to enrolling in the Doctor of Education, Robert had completed two other postgraduate qualifications. When interviewed for this study he had completed the coursework component of his studies and was in the process of carrying out the research component. Robert decided to enrol in the Doctoral program primarily to help him advance his career and expand his employment options.

I think to start with, the main motivation was to get a piece of paper and look to get a promotion or another job here. I’m very lucky that I’ve got the job I’ve got, but it’s teaching much younger kids than I’m used to, and it’s frankly not as
challenging as what I was doing in Australia. And that’s okay, it pays the bills and everything, but it would be nice to get something else.

As an Australian expatriate, he chose distance education as a practical and cost effective means of undertaking postgraduate study in his native language and within the framework of an accustomed academic culture and tradition.

The vast majority of study here in university is French […] Written academic French for me is not an option at all because it’s just nowhere near, and also since I’ve been here I’ve become much more aware of the cultural difference in terms of research and the way you write essays etcetera, so… I grew up in Australia, I’m used to that style of research and language. I explored two or three other options but frankly […] it was ridiculously expensive to study distance education in America, and it’s free for me in Australia. I’m on a scholarship even though I’m living over here, so I can do my study without worrying about other fees etcetera.

Robert was interviewed once by Skype with two-way video used throughout the interview.

6.1.13 Sarah

Sarah is a human resources executive in her mid 50s who currently runs a consulting company in an Australian capital city and is also teaching human resource subjects online for an Australian university. When first interviewed for this study she was in the early stages of undertaking a Master of Business Administration primarily through distance study but augmented by attending an optional workshop for one unit at a conference facility in a capital city. A few years beforehand Sarah also completed a Master of Human Resource Management entirely by distance study, and some years earlier than that she completed her undergraduate business degree by distance education.

After prompting from a friend and mentor, Sarah decided to enrol in the Master of Human Resource Management primarily to deepen her knowledge in a way that would support the direction in which her career was heading, but also to provide her with intellectual stimulation.

So with him pushing and me thinking I’m a bit bored now, and I was doing different work — I was already stepping into the global role at about that time — I decided to go and do the Masters and I specialised in international human resource management.
Chapter 6: Establishing the Exploratory Research Context

She subsequently began the Master of Business Administration in a “moment of pure madness” as a means of developing more strategic insight into global business operations, but has since discontinued her studies after resigning from her job and taking her career in a different direction. Sarah has always chosen to study by distance education because her work involved travelling and sometimes living overseas.

...that was really the only option I had to study, because... I mean, I did my final exams for my Masters in Shanghai. I just could not attend lectures, I went up [to Shanghai] for a couple of weeks on a project and I ended up there six months, so a lot of my study was done in hotel rooms. Most of my reading was done on planes.

Sarah self-funded both her Masters programs and was interviewed twice by Skype with two-way video used throughout the first interview and one-way video used during the second, with Sarah able to see the interviewer but the interviewer unable to see Sarah.

6.1.14 Steve

Steve is a corporate analyst in his mid 40s who works for a community partnership in a regional Australian city. He is completing a Master of Business (Finance and Economic Analysis) primarily by distance study but with attendance at an on-campus residential school for one elective unit. When interviewed for this study he was about two-thirds of the way through his studies.

Prior to enrolling in the Master of Business (Finance and Economic Analysis), Steve had completed a number of vocational qualifications in management and accounting but did not have an undergraduate degree. He decided to pursue higher education after he began working as a business development consultant and realised he needed to increase his business knowledge and understanding of the theories behind different practices. Steve originally enrolled in a Master of Business Administration but transferred to the more specialised Master of Business (Finance and Economic Analysis) after he began working in his current position which centres around conducting detailed economic and financial analyses to support business planning and development.

So really, in a nutshell, it’s come through being involved in business development and wanting to be as good as I can be in that and pursuing the education and the theoretical understanding that underpins it all.
He chose distance education in part so that he could access a program known for its strength in his subject area and also because it caters to his learning style by freeing him to study at his own pace.

*The subjects that I wanted to specialise in, the [local university] is not particularly strong on those and it only offers campus-based work 40 minutes away [...] The other thing is that because of my learning style, I find it difficult to be in a class where the class moves on if I'm still contemplating what was said back here. Conversely, if I've really got my head wrapped around something [...] I don't want to be held back, I find that frustrating as well.*

Steve has self-funded his studies and was interviewed twice by Skype with two-way video used throughout both interviews.
### Table 6.1: Participant summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Qualification</th>
<th>Study Mode</th>
<th>Reasons for Studying</th>
<th>Reasons for DE Funding</th>
<th>Interview Mode</th>
<th>Number of Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>Late 30s</td>
<td>General manager</td>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>Master of Business</td>
<td>Distance study only</td>
<td>Expand job options intellectual stimulation</td>
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<td>Skype</td>
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<td>Ann</td>
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<td>Master of Human Resource Management</td>
<td>Distance study only</td>
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<td>Engineering professional</td>
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<td>Master of Business Administration</td>
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<td>Advance career Develop new skills</td>
<td>Flexibility to fit study around work-related travel and life-context</td>
<td>Employer-funded &amp; self-funded</td>
<td>Telephone</td>
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<td>Charles</td>
<td>Early 30s</td>
<td>Information technology professional</td>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>Master of Networking and Systems Administration</td>
<td>Distance study only</td>
<td>Attain formal qualification Advance career</td>
<td>Lack of local options Flexibility to fit study around work</td>
<td>Self-funded</td>
<td>Skype</td>
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<td>Clara</td>
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<td>Human resources manager</td>
<td>Australian capital city</td>
<td>Master of Human Resource Management</td>
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<td>Intellectual stimulation Advance career Attain formal qualification</td>
<td>Flexibility to fit study around work</td>
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### Chapter 6: Establishing the Exploratory Research Context

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<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
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<th>Funding</th>
<th>Interview Mode</th>
<th>Number of Interviews</th>
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<tr>
<td>Deborah</td>
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<td>Master of Ethics &amp; Legal Studies</td>
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<td>Geographical isolation, Flexibility to fit study around work and broader life-context</td>
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<td>Face-to-face</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Master of Arts (Pastoral Counselling)</td>
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<td>Intellectual stimulation</td>
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<td>Pursue academic goals</td>
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<td>Janet</td>
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<td>Executive assistant</td>
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<td>Attain formal qualification</td>
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<td>Advance career</td>
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<td>Relationship manager</td>
<td>Australian capital city</td>
<td>Master of Business Administration</td>
<td>Distance study with optional workshops</td>
<td>Improve job prospects, Share collegiate experience</td>
<td>Cost, Portability, Flexibility to fit study around work</td>
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<td>Skype</td>
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<td>Australian capital city</td>
<td>Master of Dispute Resolution</td>
<td>Distance study with compulsory residential</td>
<td>Advance career, Intellectual stimulation, Update skills</td>
<td>Flexibility to fit study around work, Time-efficiency, Limited contact with learners</td>
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<td>Face-to-face</td>
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### Chapter 6: Establishing the Exploratory Research Context

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<td>Master of Business Administration</td>
<td>Distance study with optional workshops</td>
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<td>Robert</td>
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<td>Doctor of Education</td>
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<td>Attain formal qualification</td>
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<td>Sarah</td>
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<td>Australian capital</td>
<td>Master of Business Administration Master of Human Resource Management</td>
<td>Distance study with optional workshops Distance study only</td>
<td>Enhance theoretical knowledge Advance career Intellectual stimulation</td>
<td>Flexibility to fit study around work-related travel</td>
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<tr>
<td>Steve</td>
<td>Mid 40s</td>
<td>Corporate analyst</td>
<td>Regional Australia</td>
<td>Master of Business (Finance and Economic Analysis)</td>
<td>Distance study with one compulsory residential</td>
<td>Attain formal qualification Enhance theoretical knowledge</td>
<td>Program reputation Learning style</td>
<td>Self-funded</td>
<td>Skype</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6.2 Outlining the participants’ programs

As indicated in Chapter 3, the participants were enrolled in, or had recent experience of, ten postgraduate coursework programs delivered by distance education by two different universities. Each of these programs is non-cohort-based meaning that learners are not required to enrol in or progress through the program as a cohort and may instead complete different combinations of units at their own pace. A brief outline of the key aspects of each of these programs that are relevant to this study is included below to help contextualise the participants’ discussion of their experiences presented in the following chapters. This is accompanied by a program summary presented in Table 6.2 at the conclusion of this section.

6.2.1 Doctor of Education

The Doctor of Education is a professional doctorate program that comprised two coursework units and a major research component leading to a thesis or exegesis and portfolio for examination. The program design incorporated a blend of cognitive constructivist and social constructivist principles and required learners to engage in both independent study and collaborative learning. To complete the coursework units, learners submitted theoretically-oriented assignments presented in essay format and participated in online discussion forums. The program also required learners to attend two residential schools on-campus.

6.2.2 Master of Arts (Pastoral Counselling)

The Master of Arts (Pastoral Counselling) is a postgraduate coursework program that involved the completion of either sixteen coursework units or twelve coursework units and a dissertation. The program design incorporated a blend of cognitive constructivist and social constructivist principles and required learners to engage in both independent study and collaborative learning. Each unit required the completion of essay-based assignments that combined theory and practice and most units also required learners to attend an on-campus or regional residential school. Each unit was also supported by online discussion forums that learners could choose to participate in.
6.2.3 Master of Ethics and Legal Studies

The Master of Ethics and Legal Studies is a postgraduate coursework program that involved the completion of either twelve coursework units or eight coursework units and a dissertation. The program design predominantly reflected cognitive constructivist principles and required learners to engage in independent study rather than collaborative learning. Each unit involved the completion of essay-based assignments that combined theory and practice. Each unit was supported by online discussion forums that learners could choose to participate in and some were additionally supported by web-based teleconferences. A small number of elective units also required learners to attend an on-campus or regional residential school.

6.2.4 Master of Networking and Systems Administration

The Master of Networking and Systems Administration is a postgraduate coursework program that involved the completion of twelve coursework units. The program design reflected cognitive constructivist principles and required learners to engage in independent study rather than collaborative learning. Each unit involved the completion of essay-based or report-based assignments that combined theory and practice. Each unit was supported by online discussion forums that learners could choose to participate in and some units were also supported by web-based teleconferences. The program did not require learners to attend any face-to-face residential schools or workshops.

6.2.5 Master of Systems Development

The Master of Systems Development is a postgraduate coursework program that involved the completion of twelve coursework units. The program design reflected cognitive constructivist principles and required learners to engage in independent study rather than collaborative learning. Each unit involved the completion of essay-based or report-based assignments, some of which were theoretically-oriented and others of which combined theory and practice. Each unit was supported by online discussion forums that learners could choose to participate in and some were also supported by web-based teleconferences. The program did not require learners to attend any face-to-face residential schools or workshops.
6.2.6 Master of Business / Master of Business (Finance and Economic Analysis)

The Master of Business is a postgraduate coursework program that involved the completion of either twelve or sixteen coursework units depending on whether learners wanted to graduate with one or two specialisations. The Master of Business (Finance and Economic Analysis) is an example of the extended sixteen-unit version of this program involving two specialisations. The program design predominantly reflected cognitive constructivist principles and required learners to engage in independent study rather than collaborative learning. Most units involved the completion of essay-based rather than report-based assignments, some of which were theoretically-oriented and others of which combined theory and practice. Each unit was supported by online discussion forums that learners could choose to participate in and some units were also supported by web-based teleconferences. A small number of elective units required learners to attend a residential school on-campus and the program offered learners the option of participating in an overseas study tour to visit businesses and learn about other cultures and business practices.

6.2.7 Master of Business Administration

The Master of Business Administration is a postgraduate coursework program that involved the completion of either twelve or sixteen coursework units depending on whether learners wanted to graduate with one or two specialisations. The program design predominantly reflected cognitive constructivist principles and required learners to engage in independent study rather than collaborative learning. Each unit involved the completion of essay-based or report-based assignments, some of which were theoretically-oriented and others of which combined theory and practice. Each unit was supported by online discussion forums that learners could choose to participate in and some units were also supported by web-based teleconferences. A small number of elective units required participation in the online discussion forums or attendance at a residential school and a number of units offered learners the option of attending a city-based workshop.

6.2.8 Master of Dispute Resolution

The Master of Dispute Resolution is a postgraduate coursework program that involved the completion of twelve coursework units. The program design incorporated a blend of
cognitive constructivist and social constructivist principles and required learners to engage in both independent study and collaborative learning. Each unit required the completion of assignments that combined theory and practice and one core unit and a small number of elective units also required learners to attend a residential school on-campus. Each unit was supported by online discussion forums that learners could choose to participate in.

6.2.9 Master of Human Resource Management

The Master of Human Resource Management is a postgraduate coursework program that involved the completion of twelve coursework units. The program design predominantly reflected cognitive constructivist principles and required learners to engage in independent study rather than collaborative learning. Each unit involved the completion of essay-based or report-based assignments, some of which were theoretically-oriented and others of which combined theory and practice. Each unit was supported by online discussion forums and some were also supported by web-based teleconferences. A small number of elective units required learners to attend a residential school and the program offered learners the option of participating in an overseas study tour to visit businesses and learn about other cultures and business practices.
Table 6.2: Program summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualification</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Delivery Mode</th>
<th>Online Support Mode</th>
<th>Assignment Content</th>
<th>Assignment Format</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doctor of Education</td>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>Distance study with two compulsory residential schools</td>
<td>Online discussion forums with required participation</td>
<td>Theoretically-oriented</td>
<td>Essay-based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master of Arts (Pastoral Counselling)</td>
<td>Deborah</td>
<td>Distance study with compulsory residential schools for most units</td>
<td>Online discussion forums with optional participation</td>
<td>Applying theory to practice</td>
<td>Essay-based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master of Ethics and Legal Studies</td>
<td>Deborah</td>
<td>Distance study with compulsory residential schools for a few electives</td>
<td>Online discussion forums with optional participation and some web-based teleconferences</td>
<td>Applying theory to practice</td>
<td>Essay-based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master of Networking and Systems Administration</td>
<td>Charles</td>
<td>Distance study only</td>
<td>Online discussion forums with optional participation and some web-based teleconferences</td>
<td>Applying theory to practice</td>
<td>Essay-based and report-based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master of Systems Development</td>
<td>James</td>
<td>Distance study only</td>
<td>Online discussion forums with optional participation and some web-based teleconferences</td>
<td>Theoretically-oriented and applying theory to practice</td>
<td>Essay-based and report-based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master of Business</td>
<td>Alex, Steve</td>
<td>Distance study with compulsory residential schools for a few electives and an optional overseas study tour</td>
<td>Online discussion forums with optional participation and some web-based teleconferences</td>
<td>Theoretically-oriented and applying theory to practice</td>
<td>Mainly essay-based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master of Business (Finance and Economic Analysis)</td>
<td>Alex, Steve</td>
<td>Distance study with compulsory residential schools for a few electives and an optional overseas study tour</td>
<td>Online discussion forums with optional participation and some web-based teleconferences</td>
<td>Theoretically-oriented and applying theory to practice</td>
<td>Mainly essay-based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualification</td>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>Delivery Mode</td>
<td>Online Support Mode</td>
<td>Assignment Content</td>
<td>Assignment Format</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master of Business Administration</td>
<td>Cameron, Janet, Kelly, Natalie, Sarah</td>
<td>Distance study with compulsory residential schools for a few electives and optional workshops for some</td>
<td>Online discussion forums with mostly optional participation and some web-based teleconferences</td>
<td>Theoretically-oriented and applying theory to practice</td>
<td>Essay-based and report-based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master of Dispute Resolution</td>
<td>Melissa</td>
<td>Distance study with compulsory residential schools for one core unit and a few electives</td>
<td>Online discussion forums with optional participation</td>
<td>Applying theory to practice</td>
<td>Not known</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master of Human Resource Management</td>
<td>Ann, Clara, Sarah</td>
<td>Distance study with compulsory residential schools for a few electives and an optional overseas study tour</td>
<td>Online discussion forums with optional participation and some web-based teleconferences</td>
<td>Theoretically-oriented and applying theory to practice</td>
<td>Essay-based and report-based</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 7: Exploring the Occurrence of Life-Context Interactions

This is the first of two chapters that present findings from the exploratory phase of this study. It responds to the second research question by drawing upon a thematic analysis of the interviews conducted with this study's participants to present evidence of their engagement in life-context interactions about the academic content of their studies and the factors that explain the extent of that engagement. The chapter begins with an overview of the degree to which each participant engaged in life-context interactions. It then examines the four factors that promoted or inhibited their engagement and presents three idiographic examples for each factor that illustrate the varying levels of influence the factor had on the study's participants. The chapter concludes with three longer idiographic examples that show how these factors worked together in combination to produce significantly different degrees of engagement for different participants. From a hermeneutic perspective the chapter thus begins by presenting an overview of the whole, then examines each of its parts before finishing with examples of how the parts work together to form the whole.

7.1 Overview of participants' engagement in life-context interactions

The initial thematic analysis of the interviews described in Chapter 3 revealed that twelve of the fourteen participants engaged in dialogic life-context interactions about the academic content of their studies with people in at least one of the four life-context spheres identified in Chapter 4. Of the remaining two participants, one gave monologic presentations about his studies but did not engage in dialogic interactions, and the other did not engage in any life-context interactions at all. Of the twelve participants that engaged in dialogic life-context interactions, ten did so with people in their professional life-contexts. This included their colleagues, managers and organisational leaders as well as their wider network of peers and industry associates. Seven of the participants likewise interacted with people in their home life-contexts about the academic content of their studies, including their partners, parents and siblings. However, only three participants interacted with people in their social life-contexts about the academic content of their studies, and none interacted with anyone else in their wider community life that did not fit into one of the other three
categories. Those participants who engaged in life-context interactions with people in their professional life, home life or social life each did so to varying degrees. An approximation of these degrees was made during the analysis process and was tested with those participants who were interviewed a second time. Table 7.1 provides a summary of the outcome using the labels ‘none’, ‘minimal’, ‘moderate’ and ‘considerable’ to represent these varying degrees.

Table 7.1: Degree of participants’ engagement in life-context interactions in each sphere

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Professional Life</th>
<th>Home Life</th>
<th>Social Life</th>
<th>Community Life</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>Considerable</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Considerable</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cameron</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles</td>
<td>Considerable</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clara</td>
<td>Considerable</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deborah</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janet</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melissa</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>Considerable</td>
<td>Considerable</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Table 7.1 it can be seen that participants varied significantly in the overall degree to which they engaged in life-context interactions about the academic content of their studies. While the qualitative research approach used to conduct this phase of the study precluded any precise quantification of this degree, an approximation was developed using a weighted scoring system whereby zero points were awarded for no engagement in life-context interactions in a given sphere, two points were awarded for minimal engagement, four points for moderate engagement and eight points for considerable engagement. Figure 7.1 uses a continuum to depict the results and shows how at one end, Alex and
Natalie engaged in a considerable degree of life-context interactions, while at the other end, Kelly and Robert engaged in none.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>None</th>
<th>Minimal</th>
<th>Moderate</th>
<th>Considerable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles, Clara, Janet</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cameron, Sarah, Steve</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ann, Deborah</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James, Melissa</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly, Robert</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 7.1: Overall degree of participants’ engagement in life-context interactions

7.2 Factors influencing engagement in life-context interactions

A thematic analysis of the interviews conducted with this study’s participants revealed four key factors that either promoted or inhibited their engagement in life-context interactions:

1. The nature of the learner’s life-context.
2. The degree of linkage between the learner’s work-role and studies.
3. The design and content of the program the learner was studying.
4. The learner’s disposition and attitudes towards discussing their studies with other people in their life.

This section discusses each of these factors in turn and illustrates each with three short examples drawn from the interviews with the participants.

7.2.1 Nature of the learner’s life-context

The nature of the participants’ life-contexts influenced the degree to which they engaged in life-context interactions because it determined the range and number of other people they had access to who could relate to, understand and discuss various issues or concepts associated with the academic content of their studies. Of the four life-context spheres identified in Chapter 4, participants’ professional life-context tended to exert a considerable
influence because it was generally the context in which they hoped to apply their new knowledge and skills. The nature of each participant’s work-role was pivotal, with those working in collegial team roles such as Alex and Natalie having more opportunities to interact with colleagues about their studies than those working in discrete roles such as Clara and Sarah, or those running their own business or undertaking consultancy roles, such as Tony. While involvement in professional networks offered an alternative or complementary source of interaction for both Sarah and Tony, as shown in Sarah’s story at the end of this chapter, such activities did not occur frequently. For those working in collegial roles, existing work practices and relationships influenced their opportunities to interact, as did the nature of their physical workspace and their work colleagues’ current and past work-roles. Examples 7.2.1A and 7.2.1B below show how for Janet and Cameron, the availability of colleagues with relevant knowledge and expertise facilitated a range of interactions about the academic content of their studies. In Cameron’s case, his strong working relationship with a colleague who sat in close proximity to him further increased his tendency to engage in study-related discussions. Beyond the circumstances of participants’ work-roles, the general level of education both across their industry and amongst their work colleagues, and the extent of their colleagues’ recent involvement in further education, all influenced participants’ capacity to access people who were able to relate to and discuss the academic content of their studies. Examples 7.2.1A and 7.2.1B show how for both Janet and Cameron, working in an environment that supported their educational endeavours helped facilitate their engagement in interactions about their studies. The reverse was true for Sarah and Kelly, as shown in their stories at the end of this chapter.

Of the remaining three spheres, participants’ home life and social life exerted a more varied influence by providing an additional group of people they might interact with about the academic content of their studies, particularly when they were seeking frank or alternative viewpoints. The general level of education of a participant’s family and friends, along with the extent of their recent involvement in further education, influenced their attitudes towards postgraduate education and the extent to which they were able to relate to and discuss the academic content of a participant’s studies. Example 7.2.1A shows how in Janet’s case, her husband’s engagement in postgraduate study led the two to interact regularly about the academic content of their studies. For Cameron, on the other hand,
Example 7.2.1B shows how the absence of any family or friends with experience of postgraduate study meant he engaged in few such interactions in his home life or social life. The jobs, interests, experiences and worldviews of participants’ family members and friends were also important in determining the extent to which they had knowledge and expertise that was of relevance to participants’ studies. Their proximity and accessibility further influenced the extent to which participants’ were able to draw upon them. For example, Alex’s story presented at the end of this chapter shows how for much of his studies he was surrounded by friends with relevant jobs and interests that he sought to leverage through interactions about the academic content of his studies. This changed when he moved to Europe where he was able to draw upon the views and experiences of his wife, but not his wider circle of friends. Example 7.2.1C below shows how Robert was also located in Europe away from his Australian family and friends, but with a wife whose work and interests had less relevance to his studies. Since his studies were not a topic of interest to his friends and acquaintances either, he rarely discussed the academic content of his studies in his home life or social life.

In contrast to the three life-context spheres discussed above, participants’ community life exerted only an indirect influence on their capacity to engage in life-context interactions by establishing the broader context within which they lived and studied. The size and location of their local community, along with the range of occupations represented and the general level of education across that community, all influenced the nature of their professional life, home life and social life and the extent to which it was feasible to engage in life-context interactions. For some participants such as Deborah and Tony who lived in small communities with low levels of education, the restrictive effect this had on their engagement in life-context interactions was unsurprising. Less expected was the similar restrictions described by Robert in Example 7.2.1C, given that the community he lived in was sizeable and highly educated.

As a means of gauging how the overall nature of each participants’ life-context influenced their engagement in life-context interactions, the influence of each participants’ professional life, home life and working life were rated during the analysis process using a five point Likert scale running from extremely positive to extremely negative. No rating was given to participants’ community life since it was identified as exerting only an indirect influence. The ratings were then converted into scores that were tallied and compared.
Figure 7.2 uses a continuum to depict the results and shows how in a small number of cases participants’ life-contexts exerted a positive influence on their engagement in life-context interactions, but in a greater number of cases they exerted a mixed or negative influence. To illustrate this range of influences, three examples follow.

**Example 7.2.1A: The positive influence of Janet’s life-context**

Janet lives in a medium-sized regional Australian city located not far from the state capital. While the region is known for its manufacturing and rural industries, it is also home to the main campus of an Australian university. Thus while postgraduate study is not necessarily commonplace amongst members of the community, it is not exceptional either.

Although none of Janet’s colleagues are completing postgraduate study, most are required to update their training regularly and some are completing other forms of further education, including her manager.

[Another] university has just offered a lot of [our professional staff] a HECS-free 12-month placement to upgrade their skills to a degree, so there’s a few colleagues around me that are studying. […] And my boss is studying a public administration program, so he’s very sympathetic about my deadlines because I’m sympathetic to his — we can actually relate to each other from that point of view. So I find that that’s a plus and that’s where the conversations seem to be.
As a consequence, even though her colleagues generally do not engage in academic discussions at work, they are able to relate to her study experience and are happy to talk with her about her studies and provide her with information for assignments when needed.

_They’ve been able to help me with bits of my assignments over the three years that I’ve been studying, and I’ve been able to build on that depending on where the assignment has taken me — if you had to give examples from a study point of view about what happens in real-life — so that’s been good._

Janet’s husband is also studying a similar qualification and is able to relate to, understand and discuss various concepts and issues associated with the academic content of her studies.

_We have the advantage — or the disadvantage — that my husband and I are studying at the same time virtually the same degree, which was a really dumb thing to do, I must admit! He’s doing a lot more economics and horribly boring subjects compared to me, and he’s also doing a joint degree with agriculture, like an agribusiness degree, so often you find you just have discussions._

The nature of Janet’s professional life and home life thus contributed to her engagement in a significant number of life-context interactions about the academic content of her studies.

**Example 7.2.1B: The mixed influence of Cameron’s life-context**

Cameron lives in a large Australian capital city where he moved to pursue his career. His friends and family live in another Australian capital city, which reduces his regularity of contact with them. However, since none of them have undertaken postgraduate education and some have not completed an undergraduate degree, they generally find it difficult to relate to his studies, so Cameron tends not to discuss them in his home or social life.

_With the family, I find that they lack a little bit of context in what I’m trying to discuss. For the most part, I mean… my mum is retired, my sister works in business as well, but… I don’t feel like they have a deep understanding of what I deal with or what some of the challenges are that I face. Even just balancing work, and life, and my home and study altogether — I don’t think they have a good understanding of that. So generally I don’t talk to them about the content or what I’ve been doing day-to-day in my study life._

_In most of my circle of friends, most of them are a fairly similar age to me, around mid-30s, and probably 50% of them have undergraduate degrees but haven’t done any formal study since the age of 20 — so probably haven’t had any formal training or studies for probably 15-odd years. A lot of them I’m not sure they would recognise any value from that, so that’s probably a middle-age_
thing I guess, their time is valuable to them and they want to spend their weekends out sailing their boats or skiing the mountains or whatever.

On the other hand, Cameron works in an organisation where a significant number of his work colleagues are undertaking postgraduate education and people are happy to talk with him about the academic content of his studies.

Work's a little bit different, basically because I form relationships with other people in my workplace who are studying as well. The girl I used to sit next to in the office, she was studying her MBA at the same time I was, but at a different institution, and so almost every day I'd have a conversation with her. [...] I guess I probably learnt more because I was asking her everyday questions and ideas and concepts that I wanted to run past her.

The nature of Cameron’s professional life and the people within it thus made it possible for him to routinely engage in discussions about the academic content of his studies in a way that was simply not possible in his home life or social life.

Example 7.2.1C: The negative influence of Robert’s life-context

Robert lives in a medium-sized European city where he moved to be with his wife. The city is known for its highly educated population, which ironically has acted to inhibit Robert’s ability to engage in life-context interactions about his studies.

I think people tend to speak less of their ‘work’ or research simply because everyone’s doing stuff and it’s just accepted that that’s your work. I think far more so than in Adelaide where I grew up, or in Melbourne, where I think the idea of someone doing a doctorate or a PhD was pretty unusual — certainly in my neighbourhood it was very unusual — but here it’s not, so the idea of striking up a conversation about your research is a little bit funny given the fact that everyone else is not striking up the same conversations. So you tend to just talk about life in general rather than study.

Robert and his wife are both musicians and tend to talk more about that dimension of their lives than about Robert’s studies.

We don’t have long conversations about it. She’s a musician as well as me, and a performer and a composer, and she’s doing her own stuff which keeps her rather busy. So last year she wrote an opera, which we produced here, and she’s written a large number of other works, so she tends to work on those things and we’ll spend quite a bit of time in front of computers and music commenting on her stuff, and she’ll talk about my stuff, but…
In his professional life, Robert has been able to present several seminars about his studies to his work colleagues, but these have been more monologic than dialogic. While he had hoped to be able to discuss his studies more with people in his workplace, the prevailing climate has not facilitated this.

I think I probably had some image of being more able to change stuff at the beginning, and less so now. So, I mean, that’s just life. So I tend not to talk about it too much at school.

The nature of each sphere of Robert’s life-context has thus acted to discourage him from engaging in life-context interactions about the academic content of his studies.

7.2.2 Degree of linkage between the learner’s work-role and studies

The degree of linkage between the participants’ work-roles and their studies had a significant bearing on the extent to which they engaged in life-context interactions with people in their professional life. Three dimensions were identified that helped determine the strength of that linkage: the participants’ primary motivations for studying; the degree to which their employer supported their studies; and their capacity to make immediate use of program content.

The participants’ primary motivations for studying influenced the extent to which they perceived it relevant or appropriate to discuss their studies at work. While a number of participants, including Clara and Natalie, were studying to develop their professional knowledge and skills so they could better perform their work-role or gain a promotion, others such as Kelly and James were studying to broaden their employment options or change career and so had less reason to discuss the academic content of their studies at work. The contrasting stories of Alex and Kelly presented at the end of this chapter also show how some participants saw their studies as an intellectual challenge involving content that interested them and that they wished to talk about, while others predominantly wanted to attain a formal qualification and placed less emphasis on sharing their experience of the learning process.

Whether participants’ employers had knowledge of and supported their studies had a bearing on the extent to which they felt comfortable discussing their studies at work and actively seeking assistance from people across the organisation. A few participants such as Cameron were inspired to embark on their studies after encouragement from their
employer, which sometimes included an offer to fund their studies. Most initiated their studies themselves, with or without the backing or funding of their employer. Those like Clara and Natalie who didn’t receive financial support sometimes received other forms of support such as time release to attend exams and reduced or altered role responsibilities. Others like Deborah were less fortunate, as shown in Example 7.2.2B. Equally importantly, however, those participants such as Clara whose employers knew about and supported their studies enjoyed a greater degree of freedom to draw upon the knowledge and expertise of a wide range of colleagues, including members of senior management. This is illustrated in Example 7.2.2A.

The extent to which participants were able to make immediate use of the knowledge and skills gained from their studies in their work-role acted as an incentive or a disincentive for them to engage in life-context interactions with people in their professional life. While the degree of linkage between their study program and work-role played a part in this, as shown in each of the three examples below, other things were equally influential. Younger participants with more junior work-roles such as Kelly tended to have less capacity to exert influence in their organisation and so were not able to make immediate use of program content to implement changes or introduce new ideas. Similarly, workplace climates vary over time and Example 7.2.1C above shows how some participants such as Robert were not fortunate enough to be studying at a point in time when the organisational leadership was open to new ideas.

As a means of gauging how the overall degree of linkage between each participants’ work-role and their studies influenced their engagement in life-context interactions, during the analysis process the influence of each of the three dimensions discussed above was rated on a five point Likert scale running from extremely positive to extremely negative. The ratings were then converted into scores that were tallied and compared. Figure 7.3 uses a continuum to depict the results and shows how in the majority of cases the strong degree of linkage between participants’ work-roles and their studies exerted a positive influence on their engagement in life-context interactions. To illustrate the range of results, three examples follow.
**Figure 7.3: Influence of the linkage between participants’ work-roles and studies on their engagement in life-context interactions**

**Example 7.2.2A: The positive influence of the linkage between Clara’s work-role and studies**

Clara works as a human resource manager and decided to enrol in a Master of Human Resource Management in order to advance her career and gain intellectual stimulation.

\[I\text{ was just a bit intellectually bored, to be honest. So I looked at some different programs and chose this one because it best met my needs in terms of career progression and where HR is moving.}\]

In choosing her program Clara had an explicit expectation that she would be able to make immediate use of the knowledge she gained to enhance her current work practices.

\[The\text{ point of me studying is to get the theoretical knowledge to understand how and why my business works the way it does, and to give me strategic frameworks to progress my career. So if I wasn’t able to see the links between my current study and my current work and how they work together, there wouldn’t be any point in me paying all this money and spending all this time writing assignments and missing out on social activities — I just wouldn’t do it, it would be a waste. […] If I wasn’t getting something out of it right now I’d actually probably be a bit concerned. It’s not like I’m using it to change careers, I should be able to get things out of it right now, at my level particularly.}\]

While Clara has self-funded her studies for philosophical reasons, her employer is extremely supportive and has provided her with other forms of assistance.

\[They’ve\text{ been very flexible, I’ve been able to take leave days when I’ve had major essays due if I’ve needed the time, I’m able to use work as examples for assessments when I need to, so they’ve been very supportive…}\]
These things together have ensured there is a strong degree of linkage between Clara’s work and her studies and have provided an impetus for Clara to engage in regular discussions with her manager about the academic content of her studies.

So it’s pretty much my boss that I’ve been talking to about the content, particularly around how the content is applied to the workplace, so trying to be really practical about how the theories work, because often they don’t [laughs]. […] So he and I meet every week about my work, and if I’ve got an essay due we tend to talk about the content of that and how I’m finding it all and whether there’s anything I want to talk about. So that’s been very, very positive.

Example 7.2.2B: The mixed influence of the linkage between Deborah’s work-role and studies

Deborah works as a mediator and counsellor and decided to enrol first in a Master of Ethics and Legal Studies majoring in dispute resolution, and then in a Master of Arts (Pastoral Counselling), partly for intellectual stimulation but mostly to attain advanced level qualifications that would update her skills and knowledge and enhance her professional credibility. Despite the clear relationship between her work and her studies, Deborah’s employer provided her with only limited support.

I find that quite odd. They have a budget and send you off for training courses that cost them maybe $1000 or $2000 for the week, and they’ve sent me off on a considerable amount of training courses to give me extra skills. […] But when it comes to you doing uni, they give you five days [leave] a year to support you if you’re studying distance. […] With this course because every subject needs a residential, it looked like all my holidays would go in study leave, but then I would be useless as an employee if I hadn’t taken some break, particularly doing counselling. […] And they don’t contribute anything towards HECS or your books or anything like that, so I find that quite odd.

Despite this lukewarm support from her employer, Deborah did engage in a limited number of interactions with her colleagues about the academic content of her Master of Ethics and Legal Studies because the program content had immediate applicability.

I was working in dispute resolution — well I still am — and setting up a little service on it. So they would come and ask me things knowing I had the knowledge, knowing that I knew the latest in the Family Law Act.

She similarly had a few conversations with the other counsellor employed by her organisation about elements of the content of the Master of Arts (Pastoral Counselling) that related to forms of therapy rarely covered in other courses, and occasionally discussed her
studies at industry functions. However, she did not enjoy the sort of regular interactions about her studies that Clara had in her professional life and accordingly expressed a much weaker sense of interconnectivity between these two realms.

**Example 7.2.2C: The negative influence of the linkage between James’ work-role and studies**

James works as a database developer and decided to enrol in a Master of Systems Development in order to gain a higher qualification that would not only meet industry certification requirements but also pave the way for him move into academia. Unlike Clara and Deborah, he neither sought nor received any form of support from his employer for his studies.

…work is never going to fund anything like that anyway and I couldn’t let myself be dependent on what my employer thought I should be doing in the future. So because education was one of my goals, I thought this is a step towards it — a step towards teaching at a higher level, perhaps even.

The content of James’ study program has only limited applicability to his current work role, which has contributed to his disinclination to discuss his studies with people in his professional life.

Because my study doesn’t directly impact my work… I suppose my study in project management is [related to] the space I’d like to get into, but there’s no scope in my job for doing that full-time, however there is scope to bring in good practices. So I guess… I don’t know, sometimes it feels like I’m big-noting myself if I talk about my study at work. […] So perhaps [I talked about it] only a little bit at work, to be quite honest — yeah, probably not that much at all.

This situation was partly a product of James’ indecision about his future career.

I wonder if that’s my own doing. Like I started thinking as I just passed the halfway point in my course, like, what do I want to have happen? Do I finish the course and get a great job in project management, or do I want to trade it in and keep working for my current employer and expand my role? It does really depend on me. So perhaps I should be trying to integrate it more into my work and start doing this stuff under some sort of mentor or something like that.

The possibility therefore remained for James to develop a stronger link between his studies and his work and perhaps engage more with people in his professional life about the academic content of his studies.
7.2.3 Design and content of the study program

The design and content of the postgraduate programs the participants were studying influenced the extent to which they needed to interact with people in their personal and professional lives about the academic content of their studies. Two dimensions were identified that helped determine the extent of that need: the educational design of the program and the program content.

The vocational nature of many of the programs that participants were undertaking meant that some of the units delivered featured learning and assessment designs that encouraged them to link the academic content to the real world. This commonly took the form of authentic learning or assessment activities that required the application of content to real organisational contexts, as shown in Example 7.2.3A. It also sometimes involved submitting assignments using business-like formats such as business reports or presentations that could be used in participants' professional contexts. Such educational designs often provided participants with reasons to interact with people in their professional lives about the academic content of their studies, although as Steve's story in Example 7.2.3C shows, this was not always the case.

Several aspects of program content also created a need for participants to engage in life-context interactions about the academic content of their studies. Some programs contained content that participants found conceptually difficult and needed assistance to understand. In cases where participants had access to people in their life-context who were familiar with the relevant content, they sometimes sought their help rather than relying on that of the lecturer. Example 7.2.3B shows how in Ann's case this mainly occurred because her lecturer did not respond to emails or forums posts in a timely manner, whereas Example 7.2.3A describes how in Natalie's case this simply reflected her personal preference.

Programs that involved or allowed a research component also led some participants to engage in life-context interactions if they chose a research topic that was directly related to an organisation they were involved with in their professional life. As shown in Alex's story presented at the end of this chapter, if the research required the involvement of people related to that organisation, or if it was intended to produce knowledge that the organisation might subsequently use, then the participant inevitably engaged in
interactions with various people within the organisation as they negotiated the project and presented or delivered the results.

As a means of gauging how the design and content of the postgraduate programs influenced participants’ engagement in life-context interactions, the influence of each of the two dimensions discussed above were rated during the analysis process on a five point Likert scale running from extremely positive to extremely negative. The ratings were then converted into scores that were tallied and compared. Figure 7.4 uses a continuum to depict the results and shows how for most participants, the design and content of the programs they were enrolled in had a mixed or negative influence on their engagement in life-context interactions. To illustrate the range of results, three examples follow.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Extremely Negative</th>
<th>Mixed</th>
<th>Extremely Positive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>Alex, Ann, Clara, Janet</td>
<td>Charles</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 7.4: Influence of the design and content of participants’ postgraduate study program on their engagement in life-context interactions**

**Example 7.2.3A: The positive influence of program design and content for Natalie**

Natalie undertook a Master of Business Administration in order to develop her business skills and expand her career options. In common with many Master of Business Administration learners she was intimidated at the thought of studying financial management, which she saw as a personal weakness and conceptually difficult.

*I did a unit on financial management and accounting — and it was actually one of the things that had come out as a weakness when I’d done my career development, one of the reasons I’d enrolled in the MBA program, so I was really nervous and scared about doing that unit. I’m fine with numbers but as soon as you add percentages or dollars signs I start to get stressed.*
After finding that she needed help with the content, Natalie turned to the business manager at her workplace for assistance, rather than her university lecturer.

> I really just needed the help on how to read balance sheets and set things up, and I guess translate from accounting-speak to my own experience [...] I think the university academic staffer, he was fantastically supportive in replying to forums and things, but I actually needed somebody to be able to sit with and look at the same piece of paper or the same computer screen and check.

The design of most of the units in the program also required Natalie to complete authentic assessment activities that involved applying the academic content to an organisational context and sometimes presenting the results as a useable business report. This encouraged her to interact with her colleagues to gather information and discuss her findings.

> Often the first assignment tended to be more of, I guess, an exploration of theory and usually the second assignment relied on you being able to apply it to a specific context. [...] I was also encouraged by the academics that the way the assignment was presented — often as a business report, and sometimes it was with a PowerPoint presentation or some kind of multimedia support — could actually then be delivered to the organisation you're working within. [...] 

> … this actually required me to increase my interactions with others in the workplace to get their input and perspectives on content. So maybe I was isolated in terms of being a student in the traditional sense of the university experience, but I was actually more connected to my setting because I was required to engage more with the people around me and the shared understandings.

The design and content of the MBA program thus had a positive influence on Natalie's engagement in life-context interactions about the academic content of her studies.

**Example 7.2.3B: The mixed influence of program design and content for Ann**

Ann undertook a Master of Human Resource Management that required her to complete assessment activities involving the application of academic content to an organisational context. This contributed to her ability to make immediate use of the content, but circumstances in her professional life-context meant she did not necessarily discuss it with her colleagues.

> At the time we were going through changing from flat management into a hierarchical business model, and there was so much psychology and resistance and those sorts of things coming from live, practical situations, and a lot of my
Masters degree was all on employee behaviour, change management, marketing management, business strategy. […]

I probably used everything that I was studying in my work environment to try and understand how people were feeling and try and understand that resistance, without communicating [that] I read this in a book, or this is what I’ve come across in my studies.

Ann also found most of the program’s academic content accessible, which reduced her need to seek out the views and knowledge of others. The only time she encountered difficulties she turned first to her lecturer for help, but when she was unable to get a response in a timely manner, she turned instead to a colleague who had also completed a Master of Human Resource Management and had expertise in industrial relations.

That was a bit frustrating, actually, the only one and I still remember it vividly, because the lecturer took three-and-a-half weeks to get back to me with an answer and [the assignment] was due about two days after he sent me his answer!

The design and content of the Master of Human Resource Management thus had a mixed influence on Ann’s engagement in life-context interactions about the academic content of her studies, with other factors also exerting sway.

Example 7.2.3C: The negative influence of program design and content for Steve

Steve undertook a Master of Business (Finance and Economic Analysis) that predominantly involved the completion of theoretically-oriented assessments that did not require the application of academic content to an organisational context. While one assignment did have to be presented as a useable business report, this had no effect on Steve’s engagement in life-context interactions about the academic content of his studies.

There was one subject, a finance one, and that was really good. They got us to do an analyst’s report — basically a stockbroker’s report — on Qantas Airlines and on Cathay Pacific Airlines, and we had to present it — and I’d never done it before obviously — we had to present it as a stock brokerage report. I found that very interesting and a novel way of doing it. […]

[However] at the end of the day with the job that I do here, I’m not doing stock brokerage, I’m not in treasury in a bank, I’m not in government, so I need less environmental awareness around those particular types of jobs than I do the knowledge base across the subject.
Although Steve’s program includes content that many learners find conceptually difficult, Steve’s background in accounting, finance and economics has made it somewhat easier for him to understand and meant that he tended to share the content with others in his life-context rather than seeking their assistance with it.

My father being an accountant, and I’m a director of the accounting practice that we have — and ultimately that’s probably where I’ll end up, I’ll probably end up taking over the practice — just in terms of the knowledge that I’ve gained, particularly around finance, I’ve been able to advise my father and some of our staff around high level complex issues that they face with their clients.

The design and content of the Master of Business (Finance and Economic Analysis) thus had little effect on Steve’s engagement in life-context interactions about the academic content of his studies, with other factors exerting a much stronger influence.

7.2.4 Learner’s disposition and attitudes

The disposition and attitudes of participants towards discussing their studies with other people had a significant influence on the extent to which they engaged in life-context interactions about the academic content of their studies. Two dimensions were identified as important in this regard: their perceptions of the value of engaging in life-context interactions, and their perceptions of others’ likely responses to them initiating such interactions.

Participants were unlikely to engage in many life-context interactions about the academic content of their studies unless they perceived that such interactions would in some way benefit their studies. If participants believed that other people in their life-contexts could offer expert assistance, alternative perspectives or new insights, then they were more likely to engage in life-context interactions. They were also more likely to do so if they preferred face-to-face rather than mediated interaction and if talking things through with other people formed an important part of how they learn. Charles’ story in Example 7.2.4A exemplifies all of these things, as does Natalie’s in Example 7.2.3A. In Natalie’s case there was also a preference to seek help from experts in the field who she thought could explain things in plain English, rather than academics that she thought could not. International learners such as Charles whose first language was not English had a particular incentive to engage in such interactions if there were people in their life-context who speak their first language and have relevant knowledge and expertise. However, even amongst those participants
who shared these preferences, some struggled to find the time to engage in such interactions or simply preferred to gain moral support from other people in their life-context and take time out from their studies to talk about other things. Sarah’s story at the end of this chapter provides one such example. Other participants like Kelly found that their attempts to engage in life-context interactions resulted more in one-way monologues rather than two-way dialogues, which reduced their perceived value.

How participants thought that other people in their life-context would respond if they initiated discussions about the academic content of their studies also influenced their propensity to engage in life-context interactions. Both Melissa’s and Robert’s stories in Examples 7.2.4B and 7.2.4C show how when participants thought they would be perceived as boring, boastful or irritating they tended to avoid engaging in life-context interactions. Conversely, Alex’s story at the end of this chapter shows how when participants thought others were genuinely interested in their studies or that the nature of their studies made for topical and stimulating conversation, then they were more likely to initiate life-context interactions when opportunities arose.

As a means of gauging how participant's dispositions and attitudes influenced their engagement in life-context interactions, the influence of each of the two dimensions discussed above were rated during the analysis process on a five point Likert scale running from extremely positive to extremely negative. The ratings were then converted into scores that were tallied and compared. Figure 7.5 uses a continuum to depict the results and shows how participants were fairly evenly divided in whether their dispositions and attitudes positively or negatively influenced their engagement in life-context interactions. To illustrate the range of results, three examples follow.
Example 7.2.4A: The positive influence of Charles’ disposition and attitudes

Charles is an information technology professional who is undertaking a Master of Networking and Systems Administration program. He values and enjoys learning and proactively sought out opportunities to talk with other people in his professional life about his studies as a means of exploring the application of theory in practice and sharing his experience with others.

...most of the time I’m probably learning something interesting as well as chatting with the other guys, because when you chat with other guys they will bring in questions that you need to answer and you will also have questions that you need answered, so that brings you together so that you can interact. So yeah, I do chat with everybody, and I do like chatting with others about learning.

Although Charles also interacted with other learners in his program online, he found it was often easier to turn to his work colleagues for help with his studies because of their physical proximity, their ability to speak with him in his native language and his knowledge of their capabilities and areas of expertise.

...when you’re talking with the other learners they are not exactly close by. You don’t know their backgrounds, you don’t know how well they understand English, how well they can put it to you, which is where it becomes much easier with the guys that you work with. I will sit down and tell him this is my problem, and he tells me from his perspective. If we can’t understand each other in English, I can easily go and find someone else who can talk my language and we talk it out until he makes me understand.
Despite working in the information technology industry and routinely communicating with people electronically, Charles has a natural preference for interacting with people face-to-face because he can read their body language and see their reactions.

*When you’ve got someone that you really know and is sitting right there next to you, you know exactly what you can ask him, you know when you are pissing him off* [laughs]. *So I think there is a difference there. [...]*

*I did engage [with some colleagues] on email and on the phone, and the experience wasn’t really that much. I couldn’t really chat with them on the phone because you’re not seeing their face, you’re not seeing exactly what kind of face they’re putting on and if they’re really liking your questions, you can’t really tell. You just have to guess and you can’t really bug them that much. You have to plan your things carefully and make sure you manage that time when you get it.*

Charles’ disposition and attitudes have thus had a significantly positive influence on his propensity to interact with other people in his professional life about the academic content of his studies.

**Example 7.2.4B: The mixed influence of Melissa’s disposition and attitudes**

Melissa is undertaking a Master of Dispute Resolution and enjoys talking to her husband occasionally about the academic content of her studies.

*He always makes jokes, because he’s the complete opposite to me. He does things for the ‘learning experience’, and he takes the mickey out of me all the time, and I take it out of him all the time. [...] I’ll go ‘look, I was actually reading this paper…’, and he goes ‘oh! You learnt something at uni, did you?!’ [laughs]. Because 99% of the time I’m this little busy bee, and every now and then I’ll come out and go ‘I was actually reading…’ and he’ll get involved and talk about it with me.*

When she is at work, however Melissa prefers not to talk about her studies unless there is a specific reason for doing so because she does not want to be seen as irritating.

*I certainly talk about the fact that I’m doing study — someone might say something and I say, ‘oh yeah, I did a uni assignment’, like I deliberately throw that out there. It might be there are times where I go, ‘oh I have more on that’. But I don’t say ‘I learnt this’, because the other thing I also can’t stand — a bit like converted smokers — is people who want to jam it down your throat, people who go, ‘oh, gosh, she did that in her uni course’. So [my colleagues] wouldn’t connect that some of the opinions or new information I might have are from a subject [I studied].*
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Melissa is also ambivalent about discussing her studies with others because even though she values learning, she generally does not enjoy it and so does not necessarily wish to talk about her studies with other people in her life.

I don’t enjoy it, nup, hate it. It’s a thing that’s got to be done. My personality style is completion, I strive for completion. […]

I don’t want to [discuss it]. I just finished an assignment yesterday, I did it Friday night, Saturday, Saturday night. I’d done all the research before. No-one would have a clue what it was on — wouldn’t have a clue! Yet in two weeks time someone might say something and I might go ‘oh, was I reading an article on that?’— you know, it will come out obscure that way.

Melissa’s disposition and attitudes towards discussing her studies with others thus had a mixed influence on her propensity to engage in life-context interactions about the academic content of her studies.

Example 7.2.4C: The negative influence of Robert’s disposition and attitudes

Robert is undertaking a Doctor of Education but prefers not to discuss his studies with people in his social life because he believes they are uninterested and do not consider it an engaging topic of conversation.

I mean the standard conversation goes “How’s your study”, and you either say “fine”, or if you start talking about it, the eyes glaze over after about five minutes… […]

…certainly I’ve become a pretty boring conversationalist because someone will say “well what about so and so?”, and I can say, “well, so and so and so and so have written in 1986 and said der-de-der-de-der”, and it’s pretty hard to have a conversation with a know-all, and I can understand why that’s hard, so I tend to just work on my own and do my own bits and pieces. […]

I think often people just want a one word answer, I certainly don’t think they want the whole gamut of information.

Robert’s disposition and attitudes towards discussing his studies with others thus impacted negatively on his propensity to engage in life-context interactions about the academic content of his studies.
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7.3 Illustrating the factors in combination

To conclude this chapter, three examples are presented that illustrate the different ways in which the four factors outlined above worked together in combination to influence the degree to which participants in this study engaged in life-context interactions about the academic content of their studies.

7.3.1 Factors influencing Alex's considerable engagement in life-context interactions

Alex is an Australian expatriate who lives in a European city but completed most of his Master of Business qualification when he was working in a middle management position in an Australian capital city. He originally enrolled in his program with the support of his Australian employer who encouraged him to complete several management qualifications and paid for his studies.

I saw that management were supporting people that wanted to do extra studies, and actually were probing their staff members to go and do further studies, and that's what happened with me. They recommended to me the first course that I did which was the call centre management course, and then I took up to do the Masters degrees, but the information in both cases came from upper management to me.

Capitalising on this positive prevailing attitude towards further education, Alex took the initiative during his studies and approached members of his employer’s Board of Directors to discuss issues and concepts associated with the academic content of his studies.

I went to the Board of Directors, I actually knocked on doors to some of the directors and I told them 'look, I’m doing this course, the company is supporting me in this, and I need some help, I need to tap into your knowledge or experience and your guidance on [my] studies and on topics that I’m handling and I need to do some work on. Can we arrange some interviews and some meetings just to gather some information that will assist me producing my papers and delivering them? And in 90% of cases they were quite happy to assist.

As a result, Alex was able to develop an informal mentoring relationship with one of these board members.

The Board of Director that I approached, I felt that there was a chemistry there and I could talk to him about anything and he would respond to me honestly about how it was. Even if it wasn’t politically correct, we knew that the
conversation was going to stay between us, and that gave me the opportunity to access some insight at a higher level that I would never have had the opportunity to get.

In addition to his conversations with members of the Board of Directors, Alex discussed various issues and concepts with his workplace peers when related issues arose at work.

Because we worked in quite a stressful environment, the things that I definitely did discuss were findings about HR. Anything that had to do with human resources, like why we are at work, what needs we are covering, how to resolve conflicts, how to handle difficult situations with customers, how to handle difficult situations between peers. [...] We used to talk about those things and see how each different approach staff members had would have a different outcome.

Beyond his professional life, Alex also discussed the academic content of his studies with a range of people in his social life, many of whom had undertaken further education and had work-roles, interests and experiences that were relevant to his studies and enabled them to offer him alternative perspectives on various issues and concepts.

It was mainly with friends and family, everybody that I knew in town, everybody that I knew and that I used to hang out a lot and spend time with, occasionally we would talk about those things, and one thing that I really found interesting was to ask them about their own experience in their workforce in the field that they’re working on. How they react to upper management, what do they feel about their managers, what really makes them happy at work, what really makes them not happy at work? These were mainly things that I was interested in finding out, because I wanted to see what this means to other people that work in other industries, like in the IT industry or someone who had his own business and employed people [...] I was curious to see how they react with their staff, how do they handle difficult things if they’ve had difficult conflicts to be resolved, what was their approach — and from their experience I wanted to find out what really worked for them and what didn’t.

The design of the Master of Business program enabled Alex to complete a research specialisation involving a topic directly related to his workplace. By this stage he was living and working in Europe where few people other than his wife were interested in his studies. Finding himself unable to base his research topic on a European organisation, he turned instead to his former Australian employer who was happy to accommodate his research.

I kept on talking to the people that I used to talk with before in Australia, because my research paper was based on an Australian call centre. [...] I tried to blend it, to be honest with you. My initial thoughts were to do the research paper based on Australian data and on Greek data, because I thought it would have been an excellent opportunity to compare the two. But of course, I couldn’t do it.
While he was completing his research paper, Alex had a number of conversations about it with his wife who was able to offer some complementary insights on his topic of study.

*The core research part of the paper I was writing had to do with motivating people. [...] And because it had to do with motivation, and because my wife is a teacher, I was actually getting some feedback and some insight from her point of view on how things can work out motivating people in general. So okay, her context was a school environment, but the goal was the same, to get people to do things by motivating them. And we discussed things quite in depth.*

Alex’s proactive engagement in life-context interactions in part reflected his personal tendency to want to talk about and share his ideas and experiences with people in the various spheres of his life.

*Also remember that we’re doing a Masters degree, it’s not something that everybody does, and in one way or another, it’s nice to brag about it sometimes, you know [like] ‘as you know, I’m doing my Masters degree! I found out that this and this applies (for whatever you’re studying), and so isn’t that intriguing?! Just amazing stuff!!!’ So I think it’s pretty hard to keep it quiet.*

It also reflected his natural preference for interacting with people face-to-face and being able to read their body language and see their reactions.

*That’s why I requested to have some interviews with management, people on the Board, colleagues, family — face-to-face is invaluable. By looking at someone you can interpret sometimes better what they are trying to say to you.*

Alex’s considerable engagement in life-context interactions can thus be seen as a product of the positive influence of the four factors identified by this study: a conducive personal and professional life-context filled with people who could relate to, understand and discuss various issues or concepts associated with his studies; a strong degree of linkage between his work-role and his studies, with considerable support from his Australian employer; the design and content of the Master of Business program he completed, which encouraged him to link theoretical concepts with real-world applications; and his positive disposition and attitudes towards discussing his studies with other people in his life.
7.3.2 Factors influencing Sarah’s moderate engagement in life-context interactions

Sarah is a human resources executive who initiated and paid for both her Master of Human Resource Management and Master of Business Administration qualifications with only limited support from her employer.

_I funded both Masters. So it was only my undergrad that was funded by the company [and] that was something that was really quite rare, because it was company policy that they didn’t do that, except for very exceptional circumstances._

Sarah was, however, supported and inspired by her informal mentor who persistently urged her to undertake higher level studies to advance her career.

_If you remember the friend that I spoke to you about that was pushing me to do the degree? Well, once I got the degree he just wasn’t satisfied, was he? [Laughs] So he was like, ‘okay, so you’ve got that, now when are you doing your Masters? So after a lot of like, ‘would you give me a break?!’, I actually started to get a bit bored, because I really do like to study [so] I decided to go and do the Masters [of Human Resource Management] and I specialised in international human resource management._

The discrete nature of Sarah’s role made it difficult for her colleagues to relate to the academic content of her studies, and with few of them having undertaken postgraduate education, most were simply not interested in discussing it with her.

...they really weren’t that interested […] and I think there was so much pressure on them also, with performance things that were going on in the company. I would also get a lot of comments like, ‘I don’t know how you this, I don’t know what motivates you, what drives you, how do you get the time to do this?’ I would get a lot of comments like that, that they just couldn’t understand how I could possibly be doing it, and doing the job that I was doing.

Sarah was also working overseas during this time, providing human resource training in a joint venture in China. In this environment, studying content she was comfortable with a long way from home, she found herself focusing more on teaching others what she was learning rather than engaging in discussions to enhance her own learning.

_I was actually in a role [where] I had a junior team underneath me, so I was probably transferring a lot of my learning to teach them, and I was also working a lot with people in China at the time, and they’re like sponges soaking things up. So I was actually doing a lot of training for the teams up there and teaching_
my HR team there from my own experience. So I think I switched more from learning, probably, to a teaching role…

When Sarah began her Master of Business Administration she was living and working in Australia and had greater access to her workplace colleagues. When the design of the marketing unit included an assignment that required her to interview people in her work context, she went and spoke with a number of key leaders about her organisation’s marketing strategy and direction.

That was actually an MBA assignment. We were given this task, which was to go and do the interviewing. […] It was actually, find so many people — not necessarily key leaders, I just went for the key leaders because I had access to them — but it was find people within an organisation and interview them.

Throughout her studies, Sarah has talked often with her informal mentor who has provided her with various forms of academic assistance.

He’s been great, because you get your head buried in it so far sometimes you can’t really get yourself out of it, and you just need someone to bounce ideas around with or to proofread your paper or make sure it flows and makes sense. So he’s been a great support in that respect.

She has also occasionally discussed her studies with some of her peers in a professional network she belongs to who were more able to relate to the academic content than her colleagues at work.

I do a lot of networking outside of work through professional organisations, I’m a member of different HR directors’ forums, things like that, so there again you get to talk to other colleagues and get their view on things. And I found some of them were also studying at the same time, so we’d end up in discussions about things.

However, she has not had any similar discussions with her family members, who sometimes find it hard to relate to her studies and have shown little interest.

My family… I was the first one in my family to actually get a degree, and my father was very supportive [whereas] while my mother was quite proud of it… I’m in my 50s and my mother comes from the era where she left school, had to leave work when she got married and was a housewife all her life, so she really doesn’t see the value of it [wry laugh]. She really has struggled with a daughter that had a career, not a family. And I found… cousins, they’re supportive, but on the whole, the family other than my dad hasn’t been all that interested. Which has been disappointing, I would admit.
Although her friends have likewise shown little interest, this suited Sarah as she prefers to take time out from her studies when she is with them and talk about other things.

> With other friends, I’ve got a few that on the surface [ask], ‘how are you going’, [and I say] ‘yeah, I’m doing well’, [wry laugh], something like that, [they’re] not that interested. […]

> I’ve done a lot of sailing so a lot of my friends come from that, and when I would be on the boat, that was really my release. It was like, I don’t want to talk about work, I don’t want to talk about study […] — it was just, we’re here to get away from all of that, so it didn’t come up.

Although Sarah was not able to engage in as many life-context interactions as Alex, she nevertheless shared his preference for interacting with people face-to-face.

> To me it’s actually quite important, because I really like to talk over what I’m learning and bounce ideas around. […] With working in China and Asia in particular, I used to always say to the bosses from outside the region, you can’t underestimate face time.

Sarah’s moderate engagement in life-context interactions can thus be seen as a product of the mixed influence of each of the four factors identified by this study: a professional life-context in which a moderate number of people could relate to, understand and discuss various issues or concepts associated with her studies, and a personal life-context in which most could not; a moderate degree of linkage between her work-role and studies with only limited support from her employer; the design and content of the two Masters programs she undertook, which encouraged her to link theoretical concepts with real-world applications, but often related to content with which she needed little assistance; and her mixed attitudes towards discussing her studies with other people in her life.
7.3.3 Factors influencing Kelly’s lack of engagement in life-context interactions

Kelly is a relationship manager who initially enrolled in a Master of Business Administration program to help her gain employment in Australia and get ahead in her career. She has neither sought nor received support from her employer for her studies, and rarely discusses the academic content of her studies at work because she considers her colleagues would be unlikely to value the knowledge.

So if it comes up at work I might slip something in, a ‘oh yep, that’s just like X’, but that’s definitely not the norm. […]

A lot of the people I work with don’t really have background, it’s definitely a bit of a trend of people really working their way up, and the people that are senior have been around the traps for a long time. I think by the time I finish this, I will be one of the more qualified, most junior, relationship managers we’ve actually got in the firm, so there certainly isn’t that level of education. I think we provide a lot of education and knowledge internally, but it’s obviously very [company] focused, but there’s not necessarily that wider understanding of where this fits in for people.

[…] the value of people in [our firm] is really about the history of [the firm], it’s not necessarily about the understanding of the big, bad world outside of the firm. So, that’s probably a bit of a factor as well, the insularity of the way that we are. So part of me thinks, if I stay here for the next ten years, what will have this been worth? Nothing. It might help me bring some further insights to clients, but I don’t know that it will have been that valuable. If I move outside of the firm, it will be more valuable. So that’s probably part of the reason why I don’t share it that much, because the knowledge isn’t particularly valuable to colleagues around me.

As a junior relationship manager, Kelly has plenty of opportunities to observe business theory in practice, but not to make immediate use of it in her day-to-day work practices, or to influence change in the broader organisation. This acted to further inhibit her from talking about the academic content of her studies at work.

So we’re about to go through another load of change, we’ve just had a leadership change, and so actually the timing of what I’m reading is really appropriate, but to go to a director and go, ‘oh, I read this, it’s really great, what could we incorporate’… it’s not that I wouldn’t be listened to, because I potentially would, but it would also be, ‘well this is what we’re doing and yeah, that’s really helpful, but this is the way we’ve done it before and this is what we’re going to do, because this is the [firm’s] way’.

While the design of the units Kelly studied included assignments that required her to apply the content to her organisational context, she did not discuss these with her colleagues.
and found them frustrating because she works in a best practice organisation and struggled to identify anything she would do differently.

*The challenge for me is we are so far ahead of most companies that I sit there and go, well I don't know what I would actually do differently if I was in their position because we're not at the back end, we're way in the forefront of a lot of practices.*

Unlike Alex and Sarah, Kelly also lacked an informal mentor to assist her with such things, and while her working environment was likely to be rich with people who might perform such a role, there was nothing in the design of her study program to prompt her to seek one from amongst them.

In the other spheres of her life Kelly has also tended not to discuss the academic content of her studies. In her home life-context Kelly’s partner works in the information technology industry and has little interest in her studies, even though he is supportive of her endeavours.

*My long-suffering partner… I think it just ends up all being very one-sided and there’s no interest there. So no, I really don’t, apart from quick, high level, ‘yep, reading about this in terms of X topic’, I wouldn’t go into detail at all around what it was saying. He’s in IT as well, so there’s a bit of a disconnect with what I find interesting and what he finds interesting [laughs].*

Kelly’s friends are similarly supportive but not particularly interested in discussing her studies, and their homogeneity means they are less likely to be able to offer alternative perspectives and insights.

*From the people I have around me [in my life], even if I was to have that discussion, we’re all kind of the same cloth, so you don’t get that richness of dialogue at all.*

Kelly is also more generally aware of the impact of her studies on her life and prefers to talk with her colleagues, friends and family about other things.

*I just don’t necessarily want to harp on all the time about my study. It can feel a little bit like it takes over your life, so if you start telling everybody about it all the time…*

Kelly’s lack of engagement in life-context interactions can thus be seen as a product of the negative influence of the four factors identified by this study: a personal and professional life-context that is largely devoid of people that can relate to, understand and discuss
various issues or concepts associated with her studies; a minimal degree of linkage between her work-role and studies, with no real support from her employer; the design of some of the assignments she completed, which required her to relate the unit’s content to her organisation in a way she found unhelpful; and her ambivalent attitude towards discussing her studies with other people in her life.

7.4 Summary

The participants in this study varied significantly in the extent to which they were engaging in life-context interactions, and an analysis of the interview data showed there were four key factors that determined their degree of engagement:

1. The nature of the learner’s life-context and the extent to which it contained people who could relate to, understand and discuss various issues or concepts associated with the academic content of their studies.

2. The degree of linkage between the learner’s work and studies, including the learner’s primary motivations for studying, the degree of support they received for their studies from their employer and the extent to which they were able to make immediate use of the knowledge and skills gained from their studies in their work-role.

3. The design and content of the postgraduate program the learner was studying and the extent to which it encouraged them to link the academic content to the real-world and talk to other people in life-context about the academic content of their studies.

4. The learner’s disposition and attitudes towards discussing their studies with other people in their life, including the extent to which they perceived other people would be interested in engaging in such interactions and the degree of value such interactions might hold.

The next chapter will explore the different types of life-context interactions the participants engaged in and the contributions these have made to their learning.
Chapter 8: Exploring the Learning Contributions of Life-Context Interactions

This is the second of two chapters to present findings from the exploratory phase of this study. It responds to the third and fourth research questions by presenting evidence of the learning contributions made by life-context interactions based upon both an initial thematic analysis of the participants’ perceptions and a subsequent theoretical analysis drawing upon the extant literature on categories of learning. The chapter begins with a descriptive overview of the different types of life-context interactions that contributed to participants’ learning, the specific types of interactions that were engaged in by each participant and the factors that influenced their engagement. It then presents an interpretative analysis of the learning contributions made by each type of life-context interaction using the categories of learning set out in a reconfigured version of Fink’s taxonomy of significant learning (2003) and drawing upon examples taken from the participant’s descriptions. The chapter concludes with a discussion of participants’ perceptions of the value of life-context interactions as compared with that of their interactions with lecturers and other learners in their programs. Consistent with the principles of interpretative phenomenological analysis the chapter thus attempts to offer a more complete understanding of the learning contributions made by life-context interactions by engaging with the participants’ accounts of this phenomenon and drawing upon disciplinary theory for further insights.

8.1 Types of life-context interactions that contribute to learning

The initial thematic analysis of interviews conducted for this study revealed that participants identified five types of life-context interactions that contributed to their learning, each of which was facilitated by one or more of the influencing factors identified in the previous chapter:

1. Gathering information for assignments from people in the participant’s professional life-context in response to the assignments’ educational design.

2. Getting help with program content after finding it difficult and preferring to seek help from people with appropriate expertise outside the learning context.
3. Discussing the application of content to real-world issues with other people who are able to understand and relate to those issues and whose opinions the participant values.

4. Getting feedback on assignment drafts from people with the skills and capacity to comment on academic assignments and whose opinions the participant values.

5. Sharing knowledge with others thought to be genuinely interested, often due to the linkage between the participant’s work-role and their studies.

Table 8.1 below shows which participants engaged in each type of interaction.

**Table 8.1: Participants’ engagement in each type of life-context interaction**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant*</th>
<th>Gathering information</th>
<th>Getting help</th>
<th>Discussing application</th>
<th>Getting feedback</th>
<th>Sharing knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cameron</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clara</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deborah</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janet</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melissa</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Two participants, Kelly and Robert, did not engage in any dialogic life-context interactions that contributed to their learning.

To facilitate a more complete understanding of the ways in which the participants’ life-context interactions contributed to their learning, a further theoretical analysis was undertaken using the categories of learning set out in a reconfigured version of Fink’s taxonomy of learning that was presented in Chapter 3 and is reproduced below. From this,
distinct patterns emerged regarding the particular learning contributions made by each type of interaction. These are discussed in the following sections.

Figure 3.3: A reconfiguration of Fink’s (2003) taxonomy of learning
### Table 3.3: A reconfiguration of Fink’s taxonomy of significant learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning to Know</th>
<th>Learning to Do</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Foundational Knowledge</strong></td>
<td><strong>Thinking Skills</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locating, understanding, remembering or consolidating:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Factual information</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Procedural information</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Conceptual ideas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Metacognitive Knowledge</strong></td>
<td><strong>Psychomotor Skills</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding or utilising:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- General strategies for learning and thinking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Disciplinary approaches to constructing knowledge</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Personal preferences and motivations for using particular strategies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Criteria for selecting appropriate strategies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Learning to Be</strong></td>
<td><strong>Learning to Live Together</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal Attributes</strong></td>
<td><strong>Interpersonal Skills</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing, affirming or transforming:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Values, ethics and beliefs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Meaning schemes and meaning perspectives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Interests and passions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Personal and professional sense of identity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Self-esteem</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal Competence</strong></td>
<td><strong>Integration Skills</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing, enhancing or transforming:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Self-awareness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Self-regulation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Motivation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Self-authorship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Adapted from Fink, 2003 and drawing upon taxonomic elements of the work of Harrow, 1972; Flavell, 1979; Mezirow, 1991; Goleman, 1995; Delors, 1996; Baxter Magolda, 1999; 2001; and Anderson et al., 2001.)
8.2 Contributions of gathering information for assignments

Seven participants engaged in life-context interactions that involved gathering information for assignments from other people in their workplace. Sometimes this took the form of ordinary conversations or requests for information but other times it involved surveying staff or interviewing organisational leaders. Each interaction was prompted by the design of an assignment in one of three programs: the Master of Business, the Master of Business Administration or the Master of Human Resource Management. Beyond helping the participants to complete their assignments, these interactions primarily contributed to their learning by encouraging them to develop their integration skills through connecting the academic content of their studies to relevant knowledge and practices in their professional life-contexts. Other learning contributions included adding to participants’ foundational knowledge and developing their thinking skills. Figure 8.1 presents a graphical overview of these contributions, with the primary learning contribution shown using darker shading. A summary for each participant is also provided in Table 8.2 and a discussion of each learning contribution follows.

Figure 8.1: Overview of learning contributions from gathering information for assignments
Chapter 8: Exploring the Learning Contributions of Life-Context Interactions

Table 8.2: Learning contributions gained by gathering information for assignments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant*</th>
<th>Foundational Knowledge</th>
<th>Thinking Skills</th>
<th>Integration Skills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alex (1)</td>
<td>Factual &amp; Conceptual</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>Knowledge and practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex (2)</td>
<td>Factual</td>
<td>Creative</td>
<td>Knowledge and practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>Knowledge and practices Perspectives and opinions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cameron</td>
<td>Factual &amp; Conceptual</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clara</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>Critical</td>
<td>Knowledge and practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janet</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>Knowledge and practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>Knowledge and practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>Knowledge and practices</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Some participants provided more than one example of life-context interactions involving gathering information for assignments

8.2.1 Primary learning contribution: Integration skills

When participants interacted with their work colleagues to gather information for assignments, they extended their learning process beyond the bounds of the formal distance learning context by making connections between the academic content of their study program and current knowledge and practices in their professional life-context. In some cases, this involved a one-way transfer of information whereby the participant simply accessed information from their professional life-context as a means of completing assignments for their studies. For example, Janet spoke with a number of people in her organisation as a means of accessing factual information and gathering real-life examples to use in assignments in her Master of Business Administration program.

I work in [a health service organisation] in the office, but obviously I have a lot of dealings with the [professional staff]. As part of my studies I’ve had conversations with them to gain data, because I’ve actually been able to use real-life examples. I did a HR subject that talked about retention rates, so I was able to interview our HR manager and say, I’m doing this for uni, and she was able to share with me stuff about the service, and I was able to read documents and things I normally wouldn’t have had access to, but they were happy for me to do that.

In most cases, however, these interactions had a more two-way integrative effect, whereby the participant not only gained information to use in their studies, but also deeper insights into the operations and practices of their organisation. For example, when Sarah spoke
with people in her organisation as part of a Master of Business Administration assignment, she gained insight into the way different operational areas contributed to organisational strategy.

In the MBA program that I’m enrolled in currently […] I was doing a marketing course there, and I was going out talking to different people about that and actually interviewed some of our key leaders to get their ideas on what the company was doing, the direction the company was going in, what they saw as the best and the worst about the company, things like that. […]

I found it very beneficial because I was talking to a sales team and I worked in human resources, and even though I understood sales, I hadn’t actually questioned them really in-depth like that previously. So that certainly helped me in understanding the strategy behind sales and aligning that to strategic initiatives and objectives. […] It definitely contributed to your understanding of the business as a whole.

In Clara’s case, discussions with her manager to gather information for an assignment in her Master of Human Resource Management program led to valuable insights into the way in which business theory has been translated differently in her organisation.

The strategic planning assignment I’ve just done was a review of a practice in your own workplace, and that’s the first one that’s been specific about my own workplace. And I’ve actually found that harder to write than any of the other assignments, which has been interesting. I’ve spoken to [my manager] about the difficulties in writing it, and part of that is because our business does things in a non-traditional way, and sometimes I find that challenging because it’s very easy to get a normal strategic plan done — even though it takes a while, you follow a certain process and look, today you’ve got a plan. Whereas we don’t work that way, so trying to unpack what we do here and how that might meet certain theories has been quite involved and quite complex and I’d left it a bit late [laughs] and hadn’t quite realised how much work that was going to involve. So I’ve had conversations with my manager about how we do strategic planning to get information that I didn’t previously have so that I could continue my analysis, and we’ve spoken about what we don’t do here that we wish we did do. But it hasn’t been until the last couple of days [when I was] in the final stages of the assignment that I’ve spoken to him about what I think we do here in terms of strategic planning and how that language reframing process has actually worked quite successfully. So our leaders are able to get a plan up and running but we just don’t call it a strategic plan. And I think he’s proud that I’ve recognised that, because that is quite a complex thing to recognise in your business, because it’s so caught up in people and politics.

At their most integrative, interactions to gather information assisted participants in subsequently making a positive contribution to the direction and operations of their organisation. Perhaps the best example of this is offered by Natalie, who not only gained
insights into her organisation from a survey she undertook for the marketing unit in her Master of Business Administration program, but was able to use this information to effect positive influence on the organisation’s marketing strategy and operations.

_We had to apply and establish a survey, which had to be slightly adjusted for each different setting that you were using it in, but it then had a scoring system, and that was then the basis of an assignment. The survey itself was looking at the customer orientation of an organisation, both for internal and external customers. I used a Survey Monkey free account to do that, and then with the permission of the principal — so this is one of those ones where I had to go deliberately and say, ‘Is it okay if I do this? Can I ask staff to fill this in?’ — I put a little slip into the teachers’ pigeon-holes and the admin staff pigeon-holes, as well as sending an email out to the school staff saying, ‘it would be really good if you could do my survey please’._

[…] I also was then able to utilise [the results of] that to reinforce some things that might need to be changed or tweaked so that then marketing was actually delivered more effectively from the organisation.

### 8.2.2 Other learning contributions

Beyond helping participants to connect their studies with their professional life, interactions aimed at gathering information also sometimes supported the development of their thinking skills or foundational knowledge. In the above example from Clara there is evidence that in talking to her manager to gather information about her organisation’s strategic planning process she engaged and deepened her critical thinking skills as she sought to analyse and understand how this differed from strategic planning theory. Not all interactions are of quite this significance, however, and the following example from Cameron shows how some of his conversations with his co-worker who was also studying simply served to help him locate additional sources of foundational knowledge.

_There was a lot of time when she directed me towards research, particularly in the areas of corporate strategy and things like that, she directed me to a lot of papers that she already had and said, ‘well this might help with that idea’._
8.3 Contributions of getting help with program content

Four participants engaged in life-context interactions that involved getting help with the academic content of their program from other people in their lives. In each case these interactions were precipitated by a participant finding the academic content of a unit difficult to understand and turning to someone in their personal or professional life-context for help whom they knew had relevant knowledge and expertise. These interactions primarily contributed to participants’ learning by helping them to understand foundational knowledge, which in turn enabled them to utilise their practical or critical thinking skills. In a few cases they also contributed to the development of participants’ integration skills or interpersonal skills. Figure 8.2 presents a graphical overview of these contributions, with the primary learning contributions shown using darker shading. A summary for each participant is also provided in Table 8.3 and a discussion of each learning contribution follows.

Figure 8.2: Overview of learning contributions from getting help with program content
Table 8.3: Learning contributions gained by getting help with program content

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant*</th>
<th>Foundational Knowledge</th>
<th>Thinking Skills</th>
<th>Personal Attributes</th>
<th>Integration Skills</th>
<th>Interpersonal Skills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>Conceptual</td>
<td>Practical</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cameron (1)</td>
<td>Conceptual</td>
<td>Critical</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>Knowledge and practices</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cameron (2)</td>
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<td>Charles (1)*</td>
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<td>Interests and passions Professional identity</td>
<td>Knowledge and practices Perspectives and opinions</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalie</td>
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<td>Practical</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Some participants provided more than one example of life-context interactions involving getting help with program content

* This example also appears under ‘Sharing knowledge with others’.

8.3.1 Primary learning contributions: Foundational knowledge and thinking skills

When participants sought help with academic content from people in their personal or professional life-contexts, they were typically struggling to understand foundational information or concepts in units that contained content with which they were unfamiliar. This, in turn, was making it difficult for them to utilise the practical or critical thinking skills needed to complete an assignment. For example, when Natalie undertook a financial management unit as part of her Master of Business Administration program, she found the content conceptually intimidating and turned to the business manager at her workplace for assistance.

*I spoke in a lot of depth with the business manager at the school, and I really just needed the help on how to read balance sheets and set things up, and I guess translate from accounting-speak to my own experience and be able to complete the assignments. And that was really valuable because he was able to give me practical examples that, okay, they took all the numbers off the sheets that they were showing me, but worked through with what I needed to do. And I guess that really scaffolded my learning because I was able to see it in application and then ask further questions and then apply it again.*
Cameron similarly sought help from staff in the accounting department of his workplace as he grappled with the financial and economic content of units in his Master of Business Administration program, albeit not always with the same degree of success reported by Natalie.

*I'd quite often go to the accounting department and speak to a couple of the finance analysts there about accounting problems, or concepts I was struggling to grasp. One day I went to our Chief Financial Officer and asked for some advice on economics, but he couldn't even help me.*

In Ann’s case, it was the industrial relations content of a unit in her Master of Human Resource Management that caused her to turn to a colleague for help.

*So my main contact [was someone] I knew through a work colleague, [and that was] another lady that had done her Masters. […] I suppose my main conversations [with her were] if I was confused. An example was, once I was doing an IR subject and the lecturer really wasn’t that helpful. There was a question [in the assignment] that I was finding quite complicated within what I was reading, so I actually rang [this lady] and said to her, have you come across this in your own studies, or is it something you do when you consult, and I asked her questions around industrial relations, so she was very helpful for that.*

In each of these three cases, the process of getting help involved an essentially one-way exchange of information in which the participant asked a colleague for assistance but was not able to contribute anything significant in return. However, in Charles’ case a much more equal exchange occurred in which he was able to not only draw upon his colleagues’ expertise and knowledge to help him with an assignment in his Master of Networking and Systems Administration, but also share new insights with them in return.

*When I got this assignment, especially when I was doing the Cisco side of things, the way things were I was stuck where I didn’t trust what I was doing. I would go to my networking friends and tell them what I’ve been doing in this area so that then they would understand…*

*[…] Most of the guys that I work with at my workplace [are in] fairly senior tech level positions for network support. So when you go and ask a question, they’ll probably be interested in finding out certain ways of doing things. Like the last assignment that I had, I told them this is what I want to achieve, this is what the teacher wants, then they would say, ‘oh okay, why are you doing it that way?’, and they tell you and show you other ways of doing it. But then, the company is quite a big company and they’ve got so many associates, therefore it’s the sort of company that has got enough money to go for all these things — yet the teacher has given us an assignment [to find] a solution that will work for a very small company and this guy is not really used to thinking about making a
solution for a very small company. So it was actually technically challenging for them. When eventually they see how I’ve done it, then it’s actually an eye-opener. They could probably come up with the same answer but it would have probably taken them longer given that they are not actually used to making that kind of solution. So I think it was a two-way street where I was learning from them and they were learning some things from me as well.

Cameron, too, enjoyed a more two-way exchange when he turned to his colleague sitting next to him for help and ideas, and he found that he also enjoyed these interactions more than those he had with the people in his organisation’s accounting department.

Unfortunately, particularly when she was doing it, I was fairly new to the program, so she was giving me a lot more advice and guidance and ideas than I was sharing with her. I guess I probably learnt more because I was asking her everyday questions and ideas and concepts that I wanted to run past her.

[…] there was also areas where she had work experience that helped me. She’d worked as a risk manager, and I studied risk management as one of my units, so she had a lot of practical hands-on knowledge as well as theoretical knowledge.

[With] someone you sit next to the whole day, there’s no rush, we’re just happy to float ideas off each other every once in a while. [Whereas] I have to say that most of the people that I spoke to — particularly in the finance department, and the analysts’ department as well — they’re focused on solving the problem, and really, […] I just wanted to sit and talk with someone about, you know, ‘these three concepts, look, they don’t make sense to me’, or whatever.

8.3.2 Other learning contributions

In addition to helping these participants understand foundational knowledge and utilise their practical or critical thinking skills, interactions centred around getting help with program content also assisted two of them with the development of their integration skills by connecting their studies with their professional life. In Cameron’s case above, his professional life and study life blended together almost seamlessly through his conversations with his colleague sitting next to him at work. In Charles’ case, his tendency to study at work in an open plan office space created a natural sense of connection between these two worlds.

I spend most of my time at work, and when I do my studies I am not one of those people that does it at night, I do it during the day. When I’m reading my stuff and I’m also working, I’ll probably chat with the guys that are sitting around me, so for me it’s not a lonely event. […] I will be where people are and make
sure that when I’m doing something, if I’ve got a question I’ve got someone to ask.

The nature of Charles’ work environment also meant he gained exposure to multiple perspectives and opinions on issues related to the academic content of his studies.

I’ve been particularly lucky in the sense that I’m working with a networking team and we are in an open plan office. So normally if I start talking to one guy, chances are most of the guys around are hearing that same conversation. Some will probably step in right away to try and explain things to you, some will probably come a bit later. So you probably approach someone, you talk and he gets to make you understand. Later on, someone else was listening, he shows up because he didn’t want to be involved when someone else was talking, so he would also show up and start giving you stuff that was probably missed by the first guy. […] I might have not found as many people if it was a closed office.

This served to draw him closer to his colleagues by giving him a better appreciation of their knowledge and skills and helped him develop his interpersonal skills by building new working relationships with people he had rarely spoken to in the past.

[…] when you go over to someone to ask some questions, they will probably give you answers, and as they are giving you answers, you would tend to judge and say oh, this guy looks like he knows what he is talking about. You start getting to see whether you want to lean closer to them, and […] naturally most of the guys moved closer to me because they were all interested in what I was doing. […] Ultimately, at the end of the day, what I then realised was we never really spoke with most of the guys, but these days — wow! — we are all talking because of this [laughs].

It also contributed to the enhancement of his personal attributes by helping to transform his sense of professional identity and facilitate the development of new professional interests.

It has been changing me over time. I think there were some interests that I didn’t have in my working life. You’ve got this mindset, a certain direction that you have before you join the program. Then as you are involved in seeing certain things, you start seeing yourself somewhere else, or other work that you can be involved with. […]

Previously I would have just said I was a systems administration person. I would have only wanted to hear about certain things and not necessarily be interested in other areas, which links to what I normally do on a daily basis. But since I’ve been involved with this, I’ve found myself wanting to be involved in everything that I see around me, so I think that the transformation has been making me like to work with these other guys and technologies — anyone that I’ve been involved with, I’ve got a keen interest in what they do.
8.4 Contributions of discussing the application of content to real-world issues

Six participants engaged in life-context interactions that involved discussing how the academic content of their program applied to real-world issues. Where the previous two types of life-context interactions were undertaken exclusively with workplace colleagues, this form involved a wider variety of people including the participants’ friends, family members and professional associates as well as their workplace colleagues. The nature of the people in each sphere of the participants’ life-contexts thus played a pivotal role in determining whether they engaged in this type of interaction, as did their disposition and attitudes towards discussing their studies with others. These interactions primarily contributed to participants’ learning by helping to develop their thinking and integration skills. They also contributed to the development of foundational knowledge, personal attributes, personal competence and interpersonal skills. Figure 8.3 presents a graphical overview of these contributions, with the primary learning contributions shown using darker shading. A summary for each participant is also provided in Table 8.4 and a discussion of each learning contribution follows.

![Figure 8.3: Overview of learning contributions from discussing the application of content](image-url)
Table 8.4: Learning contributions gained by discussing the application of content to real-world issues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant*</th>
<th>Foundational Knowledge</th>
<th>Thinking Skills</th>
<th>Personal Attributes</th>
<th>Personal Competence</th>
<th>Integration Skills</th>
<th>Interpersonal Skills</th>
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<td>Values, ethics &amp; beliefs Meanings schemes &amp; perspectives Self-awareness</td>
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<td>Critical &amp; Practical</td>
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<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>Knowledge and practices Perspectives and opinions</td>
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</tbody>
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* Some participants provided more than one example of life-context interactions involving discussing the application of content to real-world issues
8.4.1 Primary learning contributions: Thinking skills and integration skills

When participants engaged in life-context interactions that involved relating the content of their study program to real-world issues, they were extending their learning process beyond the formal distance learning context by exploring how the academic content applied to matters that in some way concerned them. In some cases the participant initiated these discussions because they wanted to canvas the perspectives and opinions of people whose views they valued as they critically evaluated the program’s content and assessed its applicability to scenarios and issues they were facing. For instance, the example presented at the end of Chapter 7 showed how Alex sought out the views of a wide range of people in his personal and professional life on topics in the human resources unit of his Master of Business program. Through these conversations Alex was able to enhance both his critical thinking skills and his integration skills by evaluating and learning how to reconcile the difference between academic theory and real-world practice.

…it brought me down to earth. It was able to present to me arguments, it was able to make me question the theory that I was reading, it was able to wake me up in one way or another, to realise the theory is x, y or z but reality proves something else, so let’s try and see where the common ground is between theory and practice. It gave me that kind of insight.

In other cases, these conversations were initiated by people in the participants’ personal or professional lives and required them to engage their practical thinking skills as they discussed how the content of the program might be used to resolve a specific issue or problem facing the other person. For example, Cameron found that his father sometimes sought his opinion on work issues that related to the content of Cameron’s Master of Business Administration program.

Look, I do [discuss my studies] a little bit with my dad, he works in business, and it’s always more about the practical aspects than about the theory behind it. We just normally talk about what’s happening in our lives in all kinds of different ways. He’ll come and say, ‘ohh, I’m having a problem at work with this or that, what do you think?’, and I’ll go, ‘ohhh, I learnt in accounting last semester that you need to be careful what you say to employees from this perspective or that perspective’, and he’ll go ‘oh, that was an interesting point’.

Occasionally, however, these interactions simply occurred as a by-product of other conversations or activities in which the participants were involved. For example, when
Sarah attended professional networking forums she sometimes found herself talking with her peers about how aspects of her studies applied to the topic of the presentation.

I had a couple of colleagues there who were also studying, and we would often get together — you know, they’d have someone presenting at the forum, and then you’d be talking to them in the context of whatever you were learning about at the time, if it was relevant to what you were learning. So it was just more a general discussion. But I actually found those quite helpful, because you were able to bounce ideas around and relate it back to the topic, whether you agreed with it, you disagreed with it, what you’d studied that either supported it or didn’t — it was just a bit more interaction with other colleagues that knew what you were talking about and were interested.

Natalie, likewise, found that conversations she initiated with one of her brothers by email as a means of exploring the application of business theory to a specific industry subsequently led to bigger picture discussions, including a broad-ranging family discussion at a Christmas gathering that enhanced her integration skills by enabling her to canvas multiple perspectives and opinions and link the content of several units in her Master of Business Administration program to the news and current affairs of the day.

I know talking with my brother, in terms of looking at one of the business strategy assignments, we went into quite a bit of depth looking at emerging national and global trends in a livestock industry, and in terms of how businesses might prepare for that. So that was me looking for examples to apply a particular theory. And that was fantastic, I found out a lot about his job and his role and his organisation, which was fascinating, but it also helped me get a good mark in that assignment too. I guess that also meant we talked a lot about different other aspects that aligned from that, so it went from being just talk about an assignment to talk about the big picture and what he enjoyed in his role and the different facets and opportunities that might arise as well, so that was really interesting.

[…] it was at Christmas time we started talking about it, and I’d emailed him a few times — he works in [the city] and I was in [my regional home] […] and I think he often emailed me late at night when he was waiting at an airport somewhere. But we then followed it up, actually, at Christmas or Boxing Day lunch, and my dad actually has cattle, so you know, it sort of all then linked into the livestock industry. So the three of us ended up having quite an in-depth discussion on everything from the Indonesian cattle export rules to Coles and Woolworths’ supply chains, to breeding for different characteristics in local markets, so it was really quite broad. […] it certainly opened up the opportunity to actually explore more about the opinions and ideas and… again, it linked into the other subjects of marketing as well.
8.4.2 Other learning contributions

For several participants, life-context interactions that involved relating the academic content of their study program to real-world issues and problems provided a range of other learning benefits beyond enhancing their integration skills and thinking skills. In the example above, Natalie’s interpersonal skills were enhanced as she began relating to her family members in their professional capacities and developing richer conceptions of their multi-faceted identities. Alex, too, found himself focusing on his interpersonal skills as his discussions with various people in his workplace about the application of human resource management concepts highlighted the importance of managers being able to demonstrate strong and effective communication skills.

I was able to tap into the two different worlds in the same organisation — management world and then frontline world — and that gave me quite a spherical approach. I was able to see clearly what was happening around me, what the conflicts were, how did management see things that they did, and how did the frontline interpret what management was imposing on them. [...] And of course, one of the major things that came up was, communicate guys — it’s the key of success. Communicate what you’re trying to do to the frontline and they will be there. There were times where things were just dropped on the frontline without communicating them correctly, without spending the time to explain the reasons why this is happening, and the frontline in some cases was just so not wanting to cooperate or so non-motivated to go according to plan, and to me the most important part that caused this was miscommunication or lack of communication. [...] Extremely important stuff for business, especially big business — communicate, communicate, communicate!

In Clara’s case, her personal competence and interpersonal skills were enhanced and aspects of her personal attributes were transformed through a discussion with her manager about how the content of a unit in her Master of Human Resource Management related to an issue she was having with the business owner. By developing her self-awareness and helping her to see how she and the business owner were driven by different ethical frameworks, the discussion led her to correct and transform a faulty meaning perspective she was using to interpret the business owner’s actions. This, in turn, led her to modify her behaviour accordingly and build a more productive working relationship, thus making practical application of the unit’s content.

The very first subject I did was about values and conflicts in organisations. [...] I started to work my way through the course and the first assignment was about different ethical frameworks.
Our workplace is quite an ‘interesting’ workplace, our owner is very confident in their own opinions, and he and I have had a number of differences of opinion on how things should happen at work. I was finding that really frustrating, to the extent that I was feeling like he thought I was crap at my job, because he kept saying ‘no’ to everything I was putting forward, and he was clearly feeling frustrated by me because I was talking in nice, fluffy HR-speak, and he’s a fairly pragmatic guy. I couldn’t understand why he just couldn’t see things my way, because what I was saying was perfectly fair and reasonable and I couldn’t understand why he wouldn’t even just consider it.

When I was talking with my boss about these different ethical frameworks that I was learning through this first assignment, we started talking about how those frameworks work with business owners, and as part of the conversation I was able to recognise that the owner and I had very different ethical frameworks. He comes from a position where the business is there to make a profit and that’s its sole purpose, whereas I have a very different opinion on business that comes from a much more social justice framework where we’re here to provide opportunities for people — and that’s fairly standard for HR. But looking at the different frameworks, I was able to see that it wasn’t that he was wrong and I was right, or that he thought I was wrong — it was just that we were coming to it from a different point of view. And it totally changed how I viewed the workplace. I was at the stage I was actually considering leaving, because I felt like I just wasn’t being heard and I was wrong all the time. Once I understood that his view of what the business was here to do was totally different to mine, I was able to change how I put forward recommendations to him and couch them totally in terms of business profitability and how we would get money out of it in some way or save money, rather than on the social justice framework that I was coming from beforehand. It totally changed everything, and he started approving things I was putting forward, even though they were the same things he’d said ‘no’ to before. It just took all the personal stuff out of work and I was able to look at it from a very theoretical point of view rather than a personal point of view. And it just made everything so much easier. It didn’t mean that he hated me or that I was wrong or that he thought I wasn’t good at what I was doing, it’s just I wasn’t using the framework that he wanted or responded to. It totally changed everything, and it was through the discussion with my boss about the different ethical frameworks that the light bulb went on. [...] I was ready to quit, and [now] I’ll be here another five, ten years if they’ll have me, because of this one conversation — because it really did, it changed everything.

For Steve, a more symbiotic relationship emerged between his studies and his interactions with professional colleagues and associates, with these interactions not only contributing to the development of his personal attributes, including his self-confidence, professional interests and passions and sense of professional identity, but also being made possible by enhancements to these same attributes gained through his studies.

I’ve found the further I’ve got into my studies... I’m actually dealing with a couple of professors at the University around social enterprise. Our organisation has a
number of social enterprises and it’s an area that we’re particularly interested in, and with my finance interests and studies, we’re interested and involved in the early stages at this point in developing finance models for social enterprise. And so that’s led me to interact with these professors, which without the studies that I’ve done, I just wouldn’t do, I wouldn’t have the confidence to do.

[...] even Twitter, I think it’s only again through my studies and... sounds terribly boring, but my Tweets are around observations around current issues and economic issues and political issues, and until I’d advanced this far in my studies, I wouldn’t put my own opinions out there, whereas I’m a bit more confident now to actually put my opinion out there before someone asks it, if you know what I mean.

By the time of his second interview, towards the end of his studies, this seemed to have produced a snowballing effect that was having a wide-reaching impact on his self-esteem and professional sense of identity.

I must admit that even in the time since I spoke to you first, I’m more and more engaging with my peers in other organisations around the state that have the same responsibilities or areas of interest. The chief economist for the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, we’ve been in quite a bit of contact lately... a few people in industry peak bodies that I’m dealing with... government, more and more now than before — I mean, I’ve always interacted with government, but that was largely around contract management and things like that, whereas now I’m talking with them more around regional development issues and economic concepts and so on. [...] If anything — and I knew this would be the case anyway, and it’s perhaps one of the reasons why I decided to do the study — the overwhelming thing that I can take out of the study, aside from the career opportunities and what not, is the confidence building. [...] I think I shared with you that I had [personal difficulties], and a lot of that was to do with my confidence and things like that, and as well as the counselling that I had in coming out my difficulties, this has been a reinforcement alongside of that new way of thinking about the world or looking at the world. It’s helped me with my confidence.
8.5 Contributions of getting feedback on assignment drafts

Four participants engaged in life-context interactions that involved getting feedback on assignment drafts from other people in their lives. These interactions were facilitated by the availability of individuals in the participant’s personal or professional life-context with the skills and capacity to comment on the content, structure or expression used to compose an academic assignment. The nature of the people in each participant’s life-context thus played a pivotal role in determining whether they engaged in this type of interaction. These interactions primarily contributed to participants’ learning by helping them to improve their written communication skills and their thinking skills and occasionally also assisted them in developing their foundational knowledge. Figure 8.4 presents a graphical overview of these contributions, with the primary learning contributions shown using darker shading. A summary for each participant is also provided in Table 8.5 and a discussion of each learning contribution follows.

![Figure 8.4: Overview of learning contributions from getting feedback on assignment drafts](image-url)
### Table 8.5: Learning contributions gained by getting feedback on assignment drafts

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<th>Participant*</th>
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<th>Interpersonal Skills</th>
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<td>Written communication</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
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* One participant provided more than one example of life-context interactions involving getting feedback on assignment drafts

#### 8.5.1 Primary learning contributions: Interpersonal skills and thinking skills

When participants sought feedback on assignment drafts from people in their personal or professional life-contexts, they were often seeking to improve the quality of their written work by drawing upon the expertise of people who they knew had strong written communication skills and were confident would provide them with an honest and objective critique. In some cases participants simply sought feedback on their grammar and expression, as in the following example from Natalie.

> I did [discuss my studies] with a few friends — one in particular who often did a bit of proofreading for me, and that was fantastic, he actually worked for a newspaper, so it was just the grammar and punctuation side of things.

In other cases they sought more broad-ranging feedback on the structure and content of their assignments as well as their grammar and expression. The following example from Sarah shows how this sometimes contributed to the development of participants’ critical thinking skills by highlighting any weaknesses in their argument or the way in which it was presented.

> I have a very good friend who I’d often get to proofread my assignments and things like that for me. [...] He also came at it from a different perspective because he hasn’t studied human resources, his Masters is in community health, so he comes at it from a different angle and so brings a different perspective to it when he reviews what I’ve done. [He] will throw questions out there, because he really doesn’t know much about what I’m writing about [laughs], so you’ve really got to make sure that he can understand it, and he would in a lot of ways play devil’s advocate and throw things at me like, ‘okay, explain this to me because I have no idea what you’re talking about’, so you
really had to be able to justify what you’d written [laughs], which I found very helpful. And I don’t know that you would get that with another student.

Ann, too, found her colleagues’ feedback caused her to rethink how she presented assignments and to critically evaluate the effectiveness of how she responded to the questions being posed.

I got more support from work colleagues, because I would talk to them and say, ‘this is what I’m trying to do, this is what I’ve put together’, and I’d let them read a couple of pages of my executive summary, or something like that, and say ‘am I getting my point across?’, and then they’d give me their objective view. I found that really helpful as well — sometimes they were very critical [laughs] but you have to learn to take constructive criticism, so it was probably a good thing too.

[…], one particular lady, […] She actually taught me so much about grammar, because my grammar was pretty ordinary, and she’s extremely good at it. She’d give me a lot of constructive criticism and she’d say, ‘I can see what you’re trying to say, but you’re either waffling too long, or I don’t really understand, you need to reword’. So yeah, I did learn a fair bit, I suppose, about that side of things by taking my work to other people, and getting that constructive criticism actually assisted me in my delivery of what I was putting together, and it taught me more to look at key points rather than waffling.

Not all of these interactions were aimed at improving the quality of participants’ written communication skills, however, and the following example from Natalie shows how she sought feedback on her response to a financial management assignment from the business manager at her school as a means of checking the efficacy of her practical thinking skills and the way she was employing the associated foundational knowledge.

I think at one point, there was a scaffolded [financial management] assignment with lots of separate questions that I actually gave to the business manager to say, ‘can you answer this?’, and I answered it separately, and then we checked and they both matched up, so I was really proud, then, that I’d actually done the right thing, that I was on the right track…
8.6 Contributions of sharing knowledge with others

Nine participants engaged in life-context interactions that involved sharing knowledge gained from their studies with other people in their lives. In all but one case these interactions involved the participants’ work colleagues or associates and were facilitated by the linkage between the participants’ work-role and their studies. These interactions primarily contributed to the development of participants’ integration skills by either exposing them to other perspectives and opinions or encouraging them to make connections between their studies and their professional life-contexts. They also made a wide range of other contributions to some participants’ learning, including assisting in the development of foundational knowledge, metacognitive knowledge, thinking skills and interpersonal skills. Figure 8.5 presents a graphical overview of these contributions, with the primary learning contribution shown using darker shading. A summary for each participant is also provided in Table 8.6 and a discussion of each learning contribution follows.

![Figure 8.5: Overview of learning contributions from sharing knowledge with others](image-url)
## Table 8.6: Learning contributions gained by sharing knowledge with others

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant*</th>
<th>Foundational Knowledge</th>
<th>Metacognitive Knowledge</th>
<th>Thinking Skills</th>
<th>Personal Attributes</th>
<th>Integration Skills</th>
<th>Interpersonal Skills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Knowledge and practices</td>
<td>Perspectives and opinions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clara</td>
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<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Knowledge and practices</td>
<td>Perspectives and opinions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles**</td>
<td>Procedural</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Practical</td>
<td>Interests and passions</td>
<td>Knowledge and practices</td>
<td>Perspectives and opinions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deborah (1)</td>
<td>Factual, Conceptual &amp; Procedural</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Knowledge and practices</td>
<td>Perspectives and opinions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deborah (2)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Practical</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Knowledge and practices</td>
<td>Perspectives and opinions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>Factual</td>
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<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Perspectives and opinions</td>
<td>Perspectives and opinions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melissa</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Personal preferences and motivations</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Perspectives and opinions</td>
<td>Perspectives and opinions</td>
</tr>
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<td>Natalie</td>
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<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Knowledge and practices</td>
<td>Perspectives and opinions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Factual &amp; Conceptual</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Knowledge and practices</td>
<td>Verbal communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve (1)</td>
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<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Knowledge and practices</td>
<td>Perspectives and opinions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve (2)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Creative</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Knowledge and practices</td>
<td>Perspectives and opinions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Some participants provided more than one example of life-context interactions involving discussing the application of content to real-world issues.

** This example also appears under ‘Getting help with program content’.
8.6.1 Primary learning contributions: Integration skills

For some participants, the act of sharing knowledge gained through their studies with other people in their professional life-context was a practical means of enacting or enhancing the connection they sought between their studies and their career. For Natalie, these conversations often started with brief interactions initiated by her work colleagues that she later followed up with longer discussions about the details of her findings.

So it was fairly well-known that I was doing postgraduate studies, a lot of people would ask the conversation starter of 'how’s it going, what are you doing, what are you finding out?' [...] I guess in that work context it often tends to be short, brief comments, maybe here or there I’d catch someone while they’re at the photocopying machine, or something like that. [...] But often after the assignment I’d follow up with a couple of people [and say], ‘oh, this is what I found out’, or ‘I got a really good mark, thanks for all your help’, and then we’d talk about what I actually came up with.

This sometimes resulted in her employer adopting recommendations from her assignments as her academic life and working life became increasingly integrated.

There was a change management assignment looking at viewing the organisation through the four frames of the political, symbolic, structural and human resource frame — and I know that there was some recommendations from that that were implemented.

There was a business strategy one that I actually did for the organisation I work for now, that was my final subject, and some of that has actually been used as well. [...] There was, again, a human resource unit looking at all the specific ways the industry should prepare for the projected teaching shortage, as well as the effect of the Rudd ‘Baby Bonus’, baby boom, plasma television bonus scheme, and the demographics of the student population. [...] they were some of the assignments where things were directly used that I have, I guess, put together, or connected the dots.

Steve similarly found that his colleagues initiated conversations in which they sought to learn from and make use of his new knowledge and skills. In some cases they also asked questions that required him to engage his creative thinking skills and extend his learning beyond the formal curriculum.

What I’ve found is people are deferring to me and asking me questions and [with] my theoretical underpinning knowledge that I’ve now got I’m quite often able to answer or respond fairly quickly, but there are also times when having the conversation forces me to explore further, and I’m learning further, if you know what I mean? [...]
Return on investment is an example — obviously a very finance oriented methodology. Because I’m in the community sector, we’re very interested in social impact, so social return on investment. One of our executives who has responsibility for demonstrating our performance and our impact on the community, particularly of late he’s really keen to have me help him identify ways to measure social return on investment and to measure the social impact that our organisation and others have on our community. It’s becoming a very big thing in terms of justifying our performance in contracts and tenders and what not, not the least since the Australian Charities and Not For Profits Commission has been established. It will become almost a mandatory reporting that we do. There’s no uniform way to do this and it’s something that academics have struggled with for quite a while, because it’s quite subjective. So that’s something that I’m working on at the moment in terms of how we’re going to measure our performance and make it stand up to criticism.

Like Steve, Deborah found that her colleagues sought her advice on matters related to the academic content of her studies, but she also found she was able to share her new knowledge with industry colleagues and associates.

[It happens when] you’re at a university function or if you’re at a welfare-based function where people talk about it and say ‘oh, I need a solution for that’, [and you respond] ‘oh, I’ve just been reading up on that for a course I’m doing’. […] so it’s more in that inter-agency exchange area that you talk about it.

In contrast, Alex took the initiative to send papers and journal articles to the leaders in his organisation with whom he had established relationships when gathering information for assignments and found this led to a mutually beneficial exchange of ideas and insights.

[…] I would communicate to them white papers or articles from Harvard Business Review — I used to subscribe to that at the time — and we opened up this conversation, this backwards and forwards exchange of information, whether that be in print, telephone or verbally, on what theory says right now. There were some cases where we would actually take some articles and sit down and discuss them over a cup of coffee […]

We were looking at how change management can make things easier in an organisation which is going through changes — that one was of the major discussions I had over a cup of coffee due to the fact that we had the merger between the two banks. The merger took a number of years to complete, it wasn’t an easy road and it wasn’t very easy to go through it. It created a lot of conflicts and an unsettled environment, demotivated environment. To be honest, it looked as if it was a dark period in the business for us. I was doing at the time a subject that had to do with change management, and there were some articles that I did find on Harvard Business Review that talked about change and how you should manage it. […] I found an article, I photocopied it and I told them, ‘can you look at it and can we just discuss it a day or two later, whenever you’ve got some time?’ And I did with two of our managers from different sides — one
of them was from the service side of the business and the other one was from sales — we opened up a conversation on what is this paper talking about, it’s talking about how to manage it, and the information that I wanted to gain out of them was what have we done compared to theory and what some experts say in the field. It opened up quite an interesting topic, it assisted me greatly in finishing some essays that I was doing at the time, but in some cases I found that even management thought that, oh yeah, wow, this is not a bad thing to try, or if we had done x,y,z a year ago we would have probably been in a better position now. So it was enlightening […] and it brought some fresh ideas to some people.

By contrast, James was unable to integrate his work and studies in this way, and his only life-context interactions about the academic content of his studies were conversations with his wife in which he shared interesting pieces of knowledge and sought out her perspectives and opinions.

Because the industry component of what I’m studying is project management, that’s probably a little more of a soft skill and it tends to be more relevant, so I’ve actually had conversations with my wife about that. She’s been in a role that involved that sort of skill set as well, and you just pick up some really interesting stuff.

8.6.2 Other learning contributions

In addition to developing integration skills, life-context interactions that involved sharing knowledge with others also made a range of other learning contributions. Like James, Melissa only integrated her work and studies in a limited way and mainly spoke with her spouse about the academic content of her studies. As well as providing Melissa with an alternative perspective or opinion on various study matters, these interactions also contributed to the development of her metacognitive knowledge by providing her with insight into her study motivations and preferences.

I might say to my husband, ‘oh, I was actually reading this article’, so we will talk like that. […] I suppose in some ways it reinforces or challenges my thinking about the value of the academic side, because I would have in the past always argued that I’m just playing the game to get the piece of paper to be recognised. However, I now can see it being translated in so many different ways. So I think what I gain is not so much the topic, it’s that whole appreciation of balance and perspective and translation and other views. […]

He always makes jokes, because he’s the complete opposite to me. […] He believes you do it for the whole ‘learning experience’, he’d be on the forum chatting all the time [whereas I don’t], so we have a crack at each other.
For a number of other participants, sharing knowledge with people in their personal or professional life-context fostered the development of their interpersonal skills. Sarah, for example, found that by sharing the knowledge gained through her Master of Human Resource Management with her Australian and Chinese colleagues in China, she was able to develop her interpersonal skills in the areas of verbal communication and cultural competence. This, in turn, helped to consolidate her understanding of new foundational knowledge because it required her to actively think through and explain its application in a particular context.

I actually did draw on a lot of information that I learnt through the Masters, particularly because the international human resource management specialisation focuses a lot on cultural differences and understanding cultural differences, and with the team in China, they were interacting with a lot of cultures that they’d never actually encountered before, and so trying to get some understanding there.

[...] it certainly took the focus away from theory and made it practical. I had to be able to interpret this information, so it really did assist my learning, because if you don’t understand it you can’t teach it. [...] It also made me look at it like, okay, in the context that I want to teach this, how do I interpret this information? So that, again, reinforces your understanding and your own learning ability.

In a very different way, Steve found he was able to build a stronger and more equal personal and professional relationship with his father as a result of conversations they had in which he shared business knowledge gained from his studies and demonstrated his growing level of expertise to a point where his father sought out and accepted associated advice on the family’s accounting practice.

I’ve been able to advise my father and some of our staff around high level complex issues that they face with their clients. As well, too, I’ve been able to apply a good number of the principles to actually running the business itself, so discussing different issues and understanding what the key issues are and what to focus on. [...] and it’s interesting now where he more now defers to my knowledge of economic events and asks me ‘oh, what does that mean?’, whereas in the past it was always the other way around, of course. So I’ve noticed, in a sense, at a personal level, almost a maturing of the relationship.

[…] I think my father’s also a fairly harsh judge — not just of me, himself, but everyone, really — and if he doesn’t think you know what you’re talking about… he suffers fools lightly, let’s put it that way! So, I think there’s a certain degree of respect there now.
8.7 Perceived value of life-context interactions

In the eyes of most of those participants who engaged in a moderate or significant number of life-context interactions, there were particular benefits gained from speaking with other people in their personal or professional lives about the academic content of their studies that could not necessarily be gained from interacting with their lecturers or the other learners in their programs. These broadly related to either the nature and quality of the interactions themselves or the way in which they facilitated the development of integration skills, particularly with regards to connecting or integrating academic and non-academic knowledge and practices. A discussion of each of these benefits is presented below drawing upon examples taken from the participant’s descriptions.

8.7.1 Differing nature and quality of life-context interactions

For some of the participants, life-context interactions offered a qualitatively different type of interaction to those they generally experienced with their lecturers and the other learners in their program. For the most part, the latter types of interactions were mediated by technology and tended to be planned, stilted, time intensive and consequently shorter. They also commonly involved people with whom the participants had no prior relationship or established trust and rapport. By contrast, the participants’ life-context interactions generally occurred face-to-face and tended to be more natural, dialogic, time efficient and unhurried. They usually involved people the participants already knew and trusted or with whom they were interested in pursuing a professional relationship. For example, Cameron perceived that his conversations with his colleague who sat next to him at work had an immediacy that was lacking in his online interactions with other learners, and a frequency that could not be matched by interacting with them in person at one-time residential schools. He also had a greater degree of confidence in his colleague’s knowledge and perspectives, although he acknowledged that he might have felt differently had he been studying his entire program face-to-face.

*With [my colleague] you get the benefit of immediate interactivity. On the forum we get feedback but there’s not the [immediacy] — sometimes there’s a day-and-a-half wait before you get a response. [Talking to my colleague] is very efficient from that perspective and her knowledge as well, she was a long way ahead of me in the course and is a very rational thinker and a critical thinker as well. On the forums, a lot of the stuff I read, some of it is… part of it is you lose a bit of faith in the person at the other end because you don’t really know who*
they are, you don’t know the background they’re coming from, so I’m not sure the credibility of the advice you’re given there, […] it’s easier to put faith in someone when you’ve met them and you know them quite well and you’ve worked with them every day […] I think it would be different if it was face-to-face. I think you’d get to know them and you’d build trust, you’d build some faith in the people you’re studying with and you’d probably be able to form a bit closer relationship with them and be a bit more open with your discussions.

Alex similarly perceived that there was an immediacy to his life-context interactions about the academic content of his studies that was difficult to achieve in his discussions with his lecturers and the other learners in his program due to the mode of delivery.

…when you’re doing a distance course, timing is of the essence. Sometimes it’s not that easy to find people to talk to you [online] at the time that you needed to have conversations or the time that you wanted to speak to your lecturer…

Clara echoed Cameron’s observation that life-context interactions were more time-efficient than online interactions with other learners and also suggested that online interactions were less natural and organic.

It’s still going away and preparing a response and typing it in and hitting ‘send’. It’s no different to having to write a 1500 word essay, you just do it a bit quicker. And while they are discussions, they are false discussions because you’ve got the opportunity to go away and plan and think about it, do a bit of research before you’ve got to post your reply to whatever the leading question is, and then you get marked for your level of participation…

In Natalie’s case, her preference to interact with people in her life-context rather than with the lecturer or other learners in her program transcended the program delivery mode and related to her desire to discuss the academic content with “people that are real to me” who had practical expertise.

I’ve never really cared that much for the opinions of the other students because we’re all in the same boat — we might have different perspectives and different ideas about what we’re learning, but I’d rather talk to the experts, or to people who have the practical experience that I can then see whether the theory fits. […]

I don’t think I would have been more likely to go to lecturers if I was on campus, I think I would probably still try and use someone else to translate the theory to meet my needs. […] I would prefer to go to another pleb, another person more near my level as opposed to the lecturer. […] I wouldn’t want to go and get more confused. That would be the last resort — the last resort would be to go to the lecturer, but I would have to have tried everything inside out before I went there.
Alex, on the other hand, saw his life-context interactions as complementing rather than replacing his interactions with the lecturers and other learners.

…the people you’re going to talk to in your household or the people that you’ve got around you will be able to give you x,y,z information, learners will be able to give you a,b,c, and the lecturer will be able to give you some other aspects. Management will give me a different approach to things and my supervisors a different way, so no, they’re just part of the puzzle I guess.

Charles also saw them as complementary, and although he came to realise that “time and again I could have got that same information [from fellow students]”, he nevertheless perceived that his interactions with his workplace colleagues had qualitative advantages that rendered them invaluable. As evidenced in Chapter 7, these included the flexibility to talk with his colleagues face-to-face at length in a language other than English and to read their body language and gauge their reactions.

If you don’t have anyone else to ask then classmates are the only people you can go back to. […] But I think ultimately the more you have people closer to you like in an office, it makes it so much better than [if you only have] the guys that you communicate with over the chats and email.

8.7.2 Capacity to facilitate integration skills

In addition to perceiving differences between the nature and quality of life-context interactions as compared with interactions with lecturers and other learners, participants also perceived that life-context interactions had a special capacity to assist them in connecting academic theory and knowledge with their professional and broader practices and concerns. For Natalie, they played a critical role in helping her see how academic theories might apply to issues and contexts that were meaningful to her.

I guess they’ve allowed me to actually put the jigsaw pieces together, because by sounding out other people’s perspectives and ideas and having them talk about how it might link to current affairs or different industries, it really helped me keep my feet on the ground and not get sucked up into the ether of the academic ivory tower with all theory-base, and for me that was really important to see it applied in practice, so I think it was… I dunno, it’d have to be, say, 50% of my success could be attributed to those interactions and engagements I had with the people around me. […]

I think I tend to get very immersed in that theoretical world and immerse myself in readings or in texts and not necessarily see the application to practice, and I really need that connection with practice and the reality of how things are applied, or I probably would get lost. […]
[With the other learners in the program] I found that there was such diversity in the industries people were working in that there weren’t a lot of parallels and I couldn’t necessarily relate to how they were connecting with the concepts and theories, so it probably worked better for me to not have that as clouding the issues. [...] some of the other learners in my course were, for example, CEOs of fast food chains, and the application in that context was just a bit beyond me to try to really get it. Or the aviation industry. It was just too much to be able to apply it and understand it sufficiently…

Similar sentiments were expressed by Clara, even though she had more interest than Natalie in interacting with other learners.

…it wouldn’t have mattered how many other people I spoke to, I would still talk to [my manager]. In fact, I would probably go to him first rather than anybody else. [...] [The other learners] don’t work here, they don’t understand all the individual little personalities and decision makers and history — it’s very specific to our business. And it would be the same for them, too, in their own businesses — you know, I could say, ‘oh well, it should work this way’, [but] I don’t know what their director did before or what they tried five years ago or what the new boss coming in is wanting to do. It’s so individually people-focused that it’s very hard for anyone else who’s not in the same situation to be really constructive or understanding about it.

Underlining the high degree value she placed on life-context interactions, she also suggested they played a critical role in making her study experience meaningful.

If I wasn’t getting that application or understanding how it could work or why it wouldn’t work, there would be no point in me doing the study.

It’s actually really interesting, I hadn’t really thought so much about how much those conversations [with my boss] mean to me, but clearly they mean a lot — they mean an awful lot. So being able to find ways for that conversation, that true back and forth to happen, finding those opportunities for me is invaluable…
8.8 Summary

Participants in this study engaged in five different types of life-context interactions, each of which were prompted by different factors and contributed to their learning in different ways:

1. Gathering information for assignments from people in their professional life-context in response to the assignments’ educational design, which primarily contributed to the development of participants’ integration skills by helping them to connect the academic content of their studies to relevant knowledge and practices in their professional life-contexts.

2. Getting help with program content after finding it difficult and preferring to seek help from experts outside the learning context, which primarily contributed to the development of participants’ foundational knowledge in units that covered unfamiliar content, and also helped them to utilise the practical or critical thinking skills needed to complete an assignment.

3. Discussing the application of content to real-world issues with other people who are able to understand and relate to those issues and whose opinions are valued, which primarily contributed to the development of participants’ thinking skills and integration skills by extending their learning process beyond the formal distance learning context and exploring how the academic content applied to matters that concerned them.

4. Getting feedback on assignment drafts from people with the skills and capacity to comment on academic assignments and whose opinions are valued, which primarily contributed to the improvement of participants’ written communication and critical thinking skills by improving their grammar and expression and highlighting any weaknesses in their argument or the way in which it was presented.

5. Sharing knowledge with other people thought to be genuinely interested, often due to the linkage between the participant’s work-role and their studies, which primarily contributed to the development of participants’ integration skills by either exposing them to other perspectives and opinions or encouraging them to make connections between their studies and their professional life-contexts.

For some participants, life-context interactions offered particular benefits that could not necessarily be gained from interacting with their lecturers or the other learners in their
programs, because they provided a qualitatively different type of interaction that was more natural, dialogic, time efficient and unhurried and had a unique capacity to assist them in connecting academic theory and knowledge with their professional and broader practices and concerns. Life-context interactions were thus perceived by these participants as a valuable form of interaction in their own right rather than as a substitute for other forms of interaction.

The findings from this and the previous chapter have implications for the conceptualisations of distance learners' personal and professional life-contexts and life-context interactions developed in Chapter 4. They also point to some new possibilities with regards to distance education theories and models of interaction and the design of distance education programs. Each of these will be explored in the next chapter.
Chapter 9: Implications for Distance Education

The findings of the exploratory phase of this study provide evidence of the occurrence and learning contributions of distance learners’ life-context interactions based on the experiences of working professionals studying Australian postgraduate coursework programs by distance education. This chapter addresses the final research question by exploring the implications of these findings for concept verification and utility, and for distance education theories, models and design. In doing so it strives to offer a fuller understanding of the concept of life-context interactions by drawing out the connections between the participants’ accounts presented in the previous chapters and the disciplinary perspectives on educational interactions discussed earlier in this thesis.

9.1 Implications for concept verification and utility

Findings from this study presented in Chapters 7 and 8 refine the conceptualisation of distance learners’ life contexts and life-context interactions developed in Chapters 4 and 5 based on evidence found in the literature. They also support and add to the limited evidence in the literature of the learning contributions made by these interactions presented in Chapter 5. This section discusses each of these issues in turn.

9.1.1 Refining the conceptualisation of life-context interactions

Evidence from the exploratory phase of this study shows that the participants interacted to varying degrees with a range of people in three spheres of their personal and professional life-contexts about their studies. Such interactions most commonly occurred in the sphere of their professional life and involved the participants’ immediate work colleagues, managers and leaders or their wider network of peers. They sometimes also occurred in their home life or social life and involved their immediate and extended family members, friends or acquaintances. However, no evidence was found of participants interacting with other people in their broader community life that did not fit within one of these other three spheres.

The findings also revealed four key factors that either promoted or inhibited the participants’ engagement in life-context interactions. The first of these — the nature of
each learner’s life-context — directly relates to the four spheres of distance learners’ life-contexts identified above and highlights the different roles and relative influence of each sphere in promoting or inhibiting life-context interactions. Of these, the participants’ professional life seemed to play the most central role because it was the context in which many expected to apply their new knowledge and skills and was the one that most commonly contained people who could relate to, understand and discuss various issues or concepts associated with the academic content of their studies. The participants’ home and social lives tended to play a more variable role by providing additional people they might interact with about their studies, and their community life tended not to play a direct role at all, but instead influenced the nature of each of the other spheres by establishing the broader setting within which they lived and studied. A graphical depiction of the relative influence of each of these spheres is presented in Figure 9.1.

![Figure 9.1: Relative influence of each sphere on participants’ life-context interactions](image)

The remaining three factors helped determine the extent to which any potential for life-context interactions inherent in each of these spheres was realised as each participant integrated their studies into their existing life. If the degree of linkage between the participant’s work and their studies was strong, if the design and content of their study program provided them with reasons to seek out the views or assistance of people in their life-context, and if they were positively predisposed to discussing their studies with other people in their life, then they were likely to engage in a considerable number of life-context interactions.
interactions providing the nature of their life-context was conducive to them doing so. However, if most or all of these factors were absent, then regardless of the nature of the people in each sphere of their life-context, they were unlikely to interact much with them about their studies.

Consistent with findings made by Conrad (2008), the results also show that those participants who engaged in a considerable number of life-context interactions did so as part of a conscious effort to seek and create supporting structures for themselves outside the formal learning environment. In the case of one participant, Natalie, this act was part of a broader preference to draw upon and deepen her existing connections and engage in what might be termed a real-world community of practice (Wenger, 1998) rather than a virtual community of learners. However, for other participants such as Alex and Charles, these interactions were seen as a complement to, rather than a replacement for, their interactions with lecturers and other learners. Conversely, those participants that engaged in few life-context interactions generally seemed to have made a conscious or semi-conscious choice not to do so due to a combination of inhibiting factors. In each case, this seemed to be bound up with a reticence to discuss their studies in a real-world community of practice due to concerns over how others would respond. However, where James and Kelly instead sought to be part of a community of learners, Melissa and Robert did not. Life-context interactions thus offered a source of learning support outside the formal learning context that was sought by some participants and not others, independent of their attitudes towards interacting within the learning context.

While these findings lend support to many aspects of the conceptualisation of distance learners' life-context interactions presented in Chapters 4 and 5, they call into question the way in which the working definitions developed for both personal and professional life-contexts and life-context interactions present community life as a sphere of people and interactions rather than as a broader setting that influences the nature of other life-context spheres. The findings also challenge the distinction made between the spheres of home life and social life by showing that the same factors influenced whether participants interacted with people in these spheres. Based on these insights, the definitions of both concepts have been refined as follows:
Personal and professional life-context — Refined definition

The everyday personal and professional lives of distance learners that comprise three spheres: their personal life involving their immediate and extended family members, their friends and acquaintances and their wider community connections; their professional life involving their work colleagues, managers and organisational leaders as well as their wider network of industry peers and professional associates; and their broader community setting encompassing their locality, culture, religion and socio-economic context.

Life-context interactions — Refined definition

Interactions occurring between distance learners and other people in their personal and professional lives about their studies, including their immediate and extended family members, their friends, acquaintances and community connections, their work colleagues, managers and organisational leaders, and their and wider network of industry peers and professional associates.

Drawing upon these refined definitions, Figure 9.2 provides a graphic depiction of the general way in which the four factors that promote or inhibit life-context interactions work together. Heeding Gibson’s (1998) call for us to look at distance learners in context, it symbolically depicts these learners as embedded within an existing personal and professional life-context and shows how their studies are then integrated into that context.

![Figure 9.2: Factors influencing extent of engagement in life-context interactions](image-url)
### 9.1.2 Affirming the learning contributions of life-context interactions

In addition to refining the initial conceptualisation of life-context interactions and revealing the factors that promote or inhibit them, the findings of this study show that participants engaged in five different types of life-context interactions. Each of these was facilitated by particular combinations of factors and contributed to their learning in multiple ways that collectively corresponded with seven of the eight categories in a reconfigured version of Fink’s (2003) taxonomy of significant learning. A summary of these interaction types, influencing factors and learning contributions is provided in Table 9.1.

**Table 9.1: Types of life-context interactions, influencing factors and learning contributions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Interaction</th>
<th>Influencing Factors</th>
<th>Primary Learning Contributions</th>
<th>Other Learning Contributions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gathering information for assignments</td>
<td>Program design and content Work-study linkage</td>
<td>Integration skills</td>
<td>Foundational knowledge Thinking skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting help with program content</td>
<td>Program design and content Learner’s disposition and attitudes Nature of life-context</td>
<td>Foundational knowledge Thinking skills</td>
<td>Integration skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussing the application of content to real-world issues</td>
<td>Learner’s disposition and attitudes Nature of life-context Work-study linkage</td>
<td>Thinking skills Integration skills</td>
<td>Foundational knowledge Personal attributes Personal competence Interpersonal skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting feedback on assignment drafts</td>
<td>Learner’s disposition and attitudes Nature of life-context</td>
<td>Thinking skills Interpersonal skills</td>
<td>Foundational knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing knowledge with others</td>
<td>Learner’s disposition and attitudes Work-study linkage</td>
<td>Integration skills</td>
<td>Foundational knowledge Metacognitive knowledge Personal attributes Thinking skills Interpersonal skills</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the seven types of learning contributions found to be made by life-context interactions, perhaps the most significant is the development of participants’ integration skills, which predominantly occurred when participants interacted with other people in their personal or
professional life in order to gather information for assignments, discuss the application of content to real-world issues or share knowledge gained through their studies with others. Through these interactions, participants were able to connect the academic content of their studies to relevant knowledge and practices in their professional life-contexts and gain exposure to multiple perspectives and opinions on issues related to the academic content of their studies. The first of these integration skills could be thought of as a dimension of work integrated learning, which has been shown to enhance postgraduate student engagement (Edwards, 2011). It is also a type of learning benefit known to be highly valued by post-experience postgraduate coursework learners, who tend to have practical work-related issues and concerns that they are hoping to address through their studies and are often critical if they perceive a program has not given them the opportunity to do so (Knight, 1997b; Todhunter, 2009). This sentiment was well articulated by one of this study’s participants, Clara, who said, “If I wasn’t getting that application or understanding how it could work or why it wouldn’t work, there would be no point in me doing the study.”

The second of these integration skills is one more commonly associated with interacting with other learners as part of a learning community and is widely accepted as facilitating active learning (Fink, 2003; Edwards, 2011). However, as discussed earlier in this chapter, the participants in this study varied considerably in the degree of value they placed on interacting with others as part of a learning community, with some preferring to interact with people in an existing real-world community of practice and others seeing value in doing both. Alex perhaps best articulated this when he said:

... the people you’re going to talk to in your household or the people that you’ve got around you will be able to give you x,y,z information, learners will be able to give you a,b,c, and the lecturer will be able to give you some other aspects. Management will give me a different approach to things and my supervisors a different way, so no, they’re just part of the puzzle I guess.

Life-context interactions thus offered an alternative or complementary means of exposing learners to alternative viewpoints and helping them engage in active learning.

Beyond developing participants’ integration skills, the findings of this study show that all five types of life-context interactions contributed to the development of their factual, conceptual and procedural knowledge as well as their practical, critical and occasionally creative thinking skills. While it might be thought that participants could have achieved many of the same outcomes by interacting with their lecturers or fellow learners, their
responses indicate that by interacting instead with people in their life-contexts they were able to engage in a qualitatively different type of interaction that was more immediate, natural, dialogic and unhurried. The immediacy of these interactions seemed to be particularly important to participants when they were trying to grasp difficult conceptual or procedural knowledge and develop practical problem solving skills. By sitting and talking with someone they knew, participants were able to gain the benefits of face-to-face interaction that are less readily available through distance education. Natalie summed this up well when she said:

I think the university academic staffer, he was fantastically supportive in replying to forums and things, but I actually needed somebody to be able to sit with and look at the same piece of paper or the same computer screen and check.

The natural, conversational quality of life-context interactions was similarly important to participants when they sought to make personal meaning by either discussing the application of content to real-world issues and contexts or sharing the knowledge gained from their studies with others. This is reminiscent of Li’s (2002) discussion of the different communicative qualities and pedagogical contributions of classroom conversations in comparison to classroom discussions. Li describes classroom discussions as “usually led or moderated by the teacher who wants the discussion to serve certain educational objectives or goals” (p. 89), whereas conversations are more organic and lend themselves to the development of “personal meanings, shared atmosphere, feelings, emotions, and other relational elements” (p. 89). It is these latter affective qualities that some participants prized, as exemplified in Cameron’s comment that “really, I wanted to have a conversation where you just sit and bounce ideas off people”. It is also these qualities that seemed to facilitate a range of other learning contributions, including the development of various types of metacognitive knowledge, personal attributes, personal competence and interpersonal skills. For one participant, Clara, this resulted in a transformative learning experience (Mezirow, 1991) through which she was able to correct a faulty meaning perspective and build a more productive working relationship with the owner of the business for which she worked. Reflecting on this, and on her personal learning style, which is to “talk issues through out loud, back and forth until I come to a resolution”, she highlighted the importance of conversation in facilitating her learning:

I hadn’t really thought so much about how much those conversations [with my boss] mean to me, but clearly they mean a lot — they mean an awful lot. So
being able to find ways for that conversation, that true back and forth to happen, finding those opportunities for me is invaluable…

In distance education contexts where most interactions must be planned and consciously enacted, Li’s (2002) observation that classroom conversations are more difficult to bring about than structured discussions has particular resonance. While a few participants indicated they were able to engage in such conversations by attending face-to-face residential schools or workshops, this was not a practical or available option for many participants, nor was it a universal experience amongst those who attended such events. For some participants, life-context interactions thus offered an alternative means of gaining the particular pedagogical benefits afforded by conversational learning interactions.

In addition to valuing the conversational quality of some types of life-context interactions, a number of participants also valued the frank and detailed feedback they received from people in their life-contexts on the written presentation, structure or general content of their assignment drafts, which helped to improve their written communication skills and sometimes also their critical thinking skills. While the development of such learning skills is sometimes built into the structure of undergraduate courses as a result of research into the needs of learners in their first year of higher education (Stagg & Kimmins, 2014), this is less common in postgraduate coursework programs even though learners in these programs have been shown to have similar issues and needs (Symons, 2001; Stagg & Kimmins, 2014). This type of life-context interaction thus filled a gap for some participants that reflected a design weakness common in postgraduate coursework programs.

Given the nature of the learning contributions made by these distance learners’ life-context interactions, it seems reasonable to suggest that they are what Woo and Reeves (2007) describe as ‘meaningful interactions’ that have educational value, even though they occur outside the formal learning context. It furthermore seems that for distance learners undertaking postgraduate coursework programs, life-context interactions sometimes play a critical role in connecting and integrating knowledge between the formal learning context and their professional life-context, something that is recognised in the literature as a significant form of learning of particular importance to postgraduate coursework learners. All of this suggests that the concept of life-context interactions has a measure of disciplinary relevance and utility, which has potential implications for distance education theories, models and design. These will be discussed in the following sections.
9.2 Implications for distance education theories and models

By demonstrating the relevance and utility of the concept of life-context interactions, the findings of this study challenge aspects of the discourse surrounding theories and models of interaction in distance education, which currently sideline discussion of those interactions that occur beyond the bounds of the formal learning context. This section explores these issues and proposes a more holistic way of conceptualising learning in distance education, along with an alternative model of the learner interaction modes that contribute to learning.

9.2.1 Implications for theories of interaction in distance education

The discourse surrounding theories of interaction in distance education is currently dominated by two streams of thought: one focused on paced collaborative learning that is underpinned by a social-constructivist view of knowledge construction and privileges interactions between the learner, their teachers and other learners who form an interdependent community of inquiry; and the other focused on flexible, independent learning that is underpinned by a cognitive constructivist view of knowledge construction and privileges interactions between the learner, their teachers and the learning content which is delivered through structured learning resources. Both streams of thought share a tendency to focus almost exclusively on those interactions that occur within the formal learning context and to marginalise or ignore those interactions between learners and other people beyond that context. The present study challenges this state of affairs by producing evidence of the learning contributions gained by participants from their interactions with other people in their personal and professional lives about the academic content of their studies. Contrary to Anderson’s (2003a; 2003b) suggestion that such interactions are likely to be of a lower quality or value than those that learners engage in within the learning context, this study shows that for at least some postgraduate coursework learners they are considered to be of an equivalent or higher quality or value. More significantly, however, this study shows that they tend to be qualitatively different and have a special capacity to assist postgraduate coursework learners in connecting academic theory and knowledge with their professional and broader practices and concerns. This latter point suggests a weakness in the current theoretical discourse, which fails to acknowledge the need for some groups of distance learners to interact with people beyond the formal learning
context as an important and integral part of their learning process. While this omission is in some ways surprising, it perhaps can be understood as arising in part from the lack of attention accorded to postgraduate coursework learners in the literature until very recently, along with the tendency for the notion of community-centred learning to be conceptualised as involving virtual communities of learners but not distance learners’ real-world communities and contexts. Regardless of the reasons for the omission, the findings of this study suggest it may be time to consider remedying it.

One way this might be achieved is to draw upon Mejias’ (2005) notion of a pedagogy that validates nearness to develop a more holistic view of learning that embraces interactions between learners and other actors not only within, but also beyond, the formal learning context. Accepting Mejias’ (2005, § 2, ¶ 3) contention that “a holistic view of our lives requires that we see our actions online and offline as part of the one and the same reality”, this view seeks to move beyond the narrow interpretation of social-constructivism that underpins paced collaborative learning designs, which does not seem to allow for the possibility that people beyond the formal learning context might have an important role to play in the knowledge construction process. Taking instead as its starting point the reality that distance learners are generally working adults who are embedded in established life-contexts, this alternative view embraces Gibson’s (1998) contention that distance learners should be encouraged to draw upon people within this realm where appropriate, as a means of gaining face-to-face assistance and engaging in conversational interactions that help them connect and integrate their studies with relevant dimensions of their personal and professional lives. In seeking to redefine those people involved in the social construction of knowledge, this view does not seek to reduce the role of teachers and other learners in the learning process; rather, it adopts the position expressed by one of this study’s participants, Alex, that:

… the people that you’ve got around you will be able to give you x,y,z information, learners will be able to give you a,b,c, and the lecturer will be able to give you some other aspects. […] they’re just part of the puzzle I guess.

It therefore does not seek to decrease the relevance of those who are far from the learner, but rather attempts to “transcend the dichotomy of near and far” (Mejias, 2005, § 2, ¶ 5) by using interaction to bring the two together so that one informs the other. It is also agnostic with regards to the question of whether knowledge is primarily constructed socially through
interpersonal interaction or individually through intrapersonal cognition and instead posits that this varies from individual to individual. This means that some learners are likely to find life-context interactions more valuable than others, and this needs to be taken into account in developing educational designs that make use of them.

The logical design approach that could be adapted and used to develop distance education programs based on a pedagogy that validates nearness is the community-embedded learning approach put forward by Kazmer (2005; 2007). This will be discussed in detail later in this chapter. Before this, however, there is a need to explore the implications of the findings of this study for models of interaction modes in distance education.

9.2.2 Implications for models of interaction modes in distance education

The findings of this study challenge Anderson’s (2003a; 2003b) claim that interactions between distance learners and other people in their life-contexts do not merit inclusion in models of interaction modes in distance education because they are too idiosyncratic and not of the same quality or value as interactions within the formal education context. By identifying five types of life-context interactions that contribute to postgraduate distance learning, and by showing how participants in this study perceived that some of these interactions provided valuable learning contributions that could not have been gained by interacting with their lecturers or other learners, this study offers evidence that at least some life-context interactions are both complementary to and of an equivalent quality and value as the interactions distance learners engage in within the formal learning context. In addition, by revealing four factors that promote or inhibit distance learners’ engagement in life-context interactions and showing how one of these is the design and content of the program the learner is studying, this study further demonstrates that these interactions are not as idiosyncratic as might be assumed and are partly influenced by design choices made by the program development team.

This suggests that there is merit in reconsidering whether life-context interactions should be accepted as a mode of interaction in distance education and incorporated into associated models. The emergence of integration skills as a category of significant learning that enhances learner engagement and the importance placed on the development of such skills for some categories of learners, including those undertaking postgraduate coursework programs, lends weight to this argument and suggests an increasing
acknowledgement from educational theorists of the permeability of the boundaries between formal learning contexts and other spheres of learners’ lives. Given Mortera-Gutierrez’s (2002) observation that each actor in the distance education process engages in different modes of interaction, and given the sheer number of modes of interaction that this potentially implies, it seems more practical to develop separate models to represent the perspective of each actor rather than trying to include all of these modes within the one schematic model. Figure 9.3 depicts the modes of interaction in distance education that contribute to learning from the perspective of the learner. Building on insights drawn from Moore (1989), Ally (2008) and Bernard et al. (2009) regarding the centrality of content in the learning process, the model symbolically places content at the centre of the interaction process and shows how the learners’ educational interactions with other actors broadly relate to that content. It also shows how learners’ interactions with actors in the formal learning context tend to be mediated through technology, as observed by Hillman, Willis & Gunawardena (1994), whereas this is generally not the case with their interactions with people in their life-context. As an accompaniment to Figure 9.3, a set of definitions for the modes of interaction presented in the model is also included below.

Figure 9.3: Learner interaction modes in distance education that contribute to learning
**Learner–Content Interaction**: Cognitive interaction between the distance learner and the subject matter being studied which is generally mediated by some form of technology and may take the form of an internal conversation (Moore, 1989; Hillman, Willis & Gunawardena, 1994).

**Learner–Technology Interaction**: The cognitive and physical interaction between a distance learner and the technological interface that mediates their interaction with content, teachers, support staff and other learners (Hillman, Willis & Gunawardena, 1994). This includes computer technologies, telecommunications technologies and audio-visual technologies, as well as textbooks and printed study materials.

**Learner–Teacher Interaction**: Interpersonal interaction between the distance learner and an educator responsible for teaching the subject matter (Moore, 1989). Sometimes this is in the form of direct interactions that are either mediated by computer and telecommunications technologies or occur face-to-face during residential classes. Other times it is in the form of what Holmberg (2003) refers to as indirect empathetic ‘teaching–learning conversations’ that are mediated through pre-prepared study materials using various technologies.

**Learner–Learner Interaction**: Interpersonal interaction between distance learners about their studies, with or without a teacher present (Moore, 1989). Most commonly these interactions are mediated by telecommunications technologies but they sometimes occur face-to-face during residential classes or private study groups.

**Learner–Support Staff Interaction**: Interpersonal interaction between distance learners and the staff that work in the ancillary support areas of educational institutions, such as study support services, the IT help desk and the library (Anderson & Kuskis, 2007). Nearly all of these interactions are mediated by some combination of computer and telecommunications technologies.

**Learner–Life-context Interaction**: Interpersonal interaction between distance learners and other people in their personal and professional lives about their studies, including their immediate work colleagues and wider network of peers, the managers and leaders within their organisation and wider industry, their immediate and
extended family members, their friends and acquaintances, and the members of the local and international communities and networks to which they belong.

If life-context interactions were to be accepted as a mode of interaction in distance education, this would help facilitate the development of design approaches such as community-embedded learning (Kazmer, 2005; 2007) that are based on a pedagogy that validates nearness and seek to encourage learners to connect and integrate their studies with relevant dimensions of their personal and professional lives. A discussion of these design implications is provided next.

9.3 Implications for distance education design

As mentioned earlier in this chapter and discussed in greater depth in Chapter 5, the current discourse surrounding approaches to the design of distance education programs is dominated by discussion of two options: one involving paced, collaborative learning within an interdependent community of inquiry and the other involving flexible, independent learning using structured learning resources. The findings of this study suggest there may be value in developing a third option that might be termed ‘connected learning’, which draws upon people and resources both within and beyond the learning context. Connected learning adapts and builds upon Kazmer’s (2005; 2007) community-embedded learning approach, which has yet to be incorporated into the dominant discourse regarding distance education design. However, the term ‘connected’ has been used in preference to ‘community-embedded’ to emphasise the form of learning involved, rather than the place. It also serves to link this approach to the evolving educational concept of connected learning, which has been interpreted in the higher education sector as “enabling the learner to uniquely integrate personal connections, in-class and out-of-class experiences, collaborations, and resources of all kinds” (EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative, 2013, p. 1), but thus far seems to have been conceived mainly from the perspective of how face-to-face undergraduate learners might leverage virtual connections rather than how postgraduate distance learners might leverage real-world ones. This section explores how a connected learning approach to distance learning might work in practice by modelling its key components and discussing the learning strategies that might be used to implement it.
9.3.1 Modelling a connected learning approach to distance education design

To illustrate the components of a connected learning approach to distance education design, and to show how such an approach relates to, and differs from, the two existing design approaches, it is necessary to move away from the schematic model proffered by Anderson (2003a; 2008), which is already complex and does not lend itself well to illustrating a third approach. Instead, the model of learner interaction modes presented in Figure 9.3 has been used as the basis for a series of three additional models that separately depict the paced, collaborative learning approach in Figure 9.4, the independent, flexible learning approach in Figure 9.5, and the proposed connected learning approach in Figure 9.6. Colour has been used to highlight the actors and modes of interaction leveraged in each design approach.

![Figure 9.4: The paced, collaborative learning approach to distance education design](image-url)
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Figure 9.5: The flexible, independent learning approach to distance education design

Figure 9.6: The connected learning approach to distance education design
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Figure 9.4 shows how the paced, collaborative learning approach encourages the learner to interact with each of the other actors involved in the formal learning context, depicted in red. It also emphasises the way in which this approach centres upon interpersonal communication and requires the learner to become part of an interdependent learning community. Figure 9.5, on the other hand, shows how the flexible, independent learning approach encourages the learner to interact with their teacher, the learning content and potentially also the institution’s support staff, but not necessarily their fellow learners. It also emphasises the way in which this approach centres upon the development of individual cognition and allows the learner to study fairly autonomously. Figure 9.6 then shows how the proposed connected learning approach encourages the learner to interact with all of the other actors involved in the formal learning context, along with other people in their personal and professional life-context, depicted in blue. It also shows how they might vicariously engage with the life-context interactions and experiences of other learners by engaging in online discussions about them. The model thus emphasises how this approach centres upon the development of connections both within and beyond the learning context and encourages the learner to integrate their studies with relevant dimensions of their personal and professional life-context.

The findings of this study support and extend the work of Kazmer (2005; 2007) and highlight four key learning strategies that might be used to implement a connected learning design approach. A discussion of each of these is presented next.

9.3.2 Learning strategies for implementing connected learning

While Kazmer (2005; 2007) provides a general description of the features, benefits and potential drawbacks of community-embedded learning, she provides less detail regarding the specific learning strategies that might be employed to implement this approach. However, based on a combination of aspects of her work and some ideas that were explored with participants during the course of this study, the following four learning strategies have been identified as particularly appropriate for distance education program designs based on a connected learning approach:

1. Authentic assessments related to real-world issues and scenarios.
2. Professional mentoring relationships with workplace or industry leaders or superiors.
3. Coaching relationships that support the development of written and practical skills.
4. Online discussions related to life-context experiences and interactions.

Authentic assessment emerged from the findings of this study as a program design element that encourages postgraduate coursework distance learners to develop their integration skills by engaging in life-context interactions that help them connect the academic content of their study program with knowledge and practices in real-world professional contexts. The term ‘authentic assessment’ refers to a wide range of alternative, non-traditional assessments that require learners to relate academic concepts to real-world practice and actively construct meaning rather than passively repeat course content (Mathur & Murray, 2006; Whitelock & Cross, 2012). For distance education programs designed to facilitate connected learning, the most appropriate types of authentic assessment are likely to include assignments that are either work-related, project-based, problem-based or reflective and encourage learners to engage in life-context interactions in order to gather information and discuss the application of program content to real-world issues and scenarios. Authentic assessment is associated with active learning and work-integrated learning, two of the six engagement scales that are empirically linked with high-quality postgraduate learning (Edwards, 2011). It is also consistent with the principles of best practice in the delivery of professional postgraduate coursework programs proposed by Reid, Rennie and Shortland-Jones (2005), which suggest that assessment requirements should link theory with professional practice.

The idea of actively encouraging postgraduate coursework distance learners to establish a professional mentoring relationship as part of their studies arose from a chance remark made by one of this study’s participants, Sarah, during her first interview. In the course of discussing the learning contributions she had gained from interacting with her mentor about her studies, she said:

*I think actually a mentoring program might be more valuable where students could be perhaps hooked up with someone external that would support them through the program. […] And that’s just something I found through luck more than anything, really, [because] I had this person who had pushed me to do the degree.*

A further impetus for exploring this idea came from a remark made by another participant, James, who admitted that his studies remained relatively disconnected from his
professional life and said, “perhaps I should be trying to integrate it more into my work and start doing this stuff under some sort of mentor or something like that”.

Mentoring programs that link learners with industry professionals have been embraced as a valuable learning strategy in some professionally-oriented face-to-face higher education programs, including teaching, nursing, medicine and engineering, because of their capacity to facilitate personal and professional growth, assist learners in connecting theory with professional practice and provide a source of additional help (for example, Muller & Barsion, 2003; Campbell & Brummett, 2007; Ali & Panther, 2008; Frei, Stamm & Buddeberg-Fischer, 2010). Many higher education institutions also offer career mentoring programs through their student services division that link students with professionals in the institution’s alumni network. Such programs can provide learners with an enriching educational experience, another of the six engagement scales empirically linked with high-quality learning (Edwards, 2011). They are also consistent with the principles of best practice in professional postgraduate coursework programs (Reid, Rennie & Shortland-Jones, 2005), which suggest that relevant industry or professional activities should be integrated into such programs. However, professional mentoring remains under-utilised and under-researched as a learning strategy in both undergraduate and postgraduate coursework distance education programs, despite some evidence in the literature of its viability and value (Morgan, O’Reilly & Stewart, 1996; Morgan & Smit, 2001; Buchanan, Myers & Hardin, 2005). The reasons for this are unclear, although Morgan and Smit (2001) note that little thought seems to be given to encouraging distance learners to harness the potential support available to them in their personal and professional life-contexts. The findings of this study support this observation, with the few participants who interacted with a mentor about their studies doing so through their own initiative and not as a result of any encouragement from the design of their study program.

To gauge what other participants in this study thought of the idea of being encouraged to seek out a professional mentor, those participants who were interviewed a second time were asked for their opinions on this matter. All responded positively, with one participant, Alex, going so far as to say, “I would have jumped at the opportunity. […] Wow! What an idea! What an idea! I reckon that would have been brilliant!” Several participants cautioned, however, that it was essential that each learner sought out their own mentor
because of the degree of compatibility needed for the mentoring relationship to work.

Natalie, for example, said:

“It would have to be the right person. Being assigned a mentor, in my experience, hasn’t necessarily worked, so it would have to be a good match in terms of the two people. [...] I’m doing a Grad Cert in University Leadership and Management now, which is also by distance, and in that program you must have a mentor and it’s somebody that you need to seek out. And that’s been really valuable. So I know the value of the mentor, but I also know that for me it needs to be a person who’s well matched, who’s doing it for the right reasons and is compatible.

When asked whether they could have found their own mentor, each of these participants answered in the affirmative, including those located in small communities. Clara noted that many postgraduate coursework learners might already have someone in their personal or professional life-context who performs this function informally, and said “if there was information about how your informal mentor could be of more assistance to you as a learner, that’s probably helpful”. Steve also suggested that if no one appropriate could be found in a local community, learners might use the affordances of technology to access people further afield:

[…] coming back to your concept and video conferences and the like, there’s no reason why it couldn’t be someone in Melbourne or Sydney or Canberra in doing this — that would be as equally appealing as well. In fact, because of the travel distances [here], you’d probably have to do this anyway.

This suggests that the challenges of encouraging postgraduate coursework distance learners to pursue professional mentoring opportunities are not insurmountable and there may be great value in exploring this idea further as part of the development of programs based on a connected learning design.

In a similar vein, distance learners might also be encouraged to form coaching relationships with people in their personal or professional life-contexts who are able to either help them with the development of practical skills that are better explained or demonstrated face-to-face, or critique their assignment drafts and help them improve various aspects of their written communication skills. Coaching relationships are more transactional than mentoring relationships and tend to centre on specific tasks or skills (Morgan & Smit, 2001). As with mentoring relationships, coaching relationships seem to be under-utilised in distance education programs, despite Gibson’s (1998, p. 122) call made
more than fifteen years ago for distance educators “to empower the learner to assess their context for resources and to seek out those resources as another source of help”. The findings of this study show that some participants gained considerable benefit from coaching relationships, which performed functions more commonly fulfilled by teaching staff and academic support services in face-to-face programs. This suggests there may be value in proactively promoting their benefits to distance learners undertaking programs based on a connected learning design. The findings also indicate that learners’ capacity to form coaching relationships is contingent on the nature of their life-contexts and the extent to which they have access to people with the necessary skills and capacities. Since this is unlikely to reflect the reality for all learners, coaching relationships might be usefully promoted as a supplementary strategy for learners to explore where practicable rather than a universal strategy appropriate to all.

Turning to the final strategy, online discussions feature in the community-embedded learning approach developed by Kazmer (2005; 2007) and are also commonly used in distance education programs designed using the paced collaborative learning approach. They are recognised for their value in helping distance learners connect with one another in a way that creates not only a supportive learning environment, but also a network of relationships that can be maintained and leveraged beyond the life of the learning program (Anderson, 2003a; 2008; Kazmer, 2005; 2007). The former of these is acknowledged as an engagement scale that is empirically linked with high-quality postgraduate learning (Edwards, 2011) and the latter accords with one of the best practice principles for professional postgraduate coursework programs (Reid, Rennie & Shortland-Jones, 2005), which suggests that professional networking should be promoted. Online discussions additionally expose distance learners to multiple viewpoints and can help them to move beyond their own context and expand their worldview (Anderson, 2003a; 2008; Kazmer, 2005; 2007). For programs based on a connected learning design, online discussions might usefully focus on sharing life-context experiences and interactions related to the application of program content in practice rather than engaging in paced, collaborative activities. This would require the learners to connect with people, ideas and experiences both within and beyond the learning context and is consistent with Mackey’s (2010) recommendation that online professional learning programs foster the brokering of ideas between online learning communities and professional communities of practice. It is also
consistent with the best practice principles for professional postgraduate coursework programs (Reid, Rennie & Shortland-Jones, 2005), which suggest that learners should be treated as adults whose experience is valued and provided with opportunities to engage in activities that enable them to contribute their own knowledge. In addition, it would reduce the need for the high levels of online interactivity common in paced collaborative learning programs, something that Kazmer (2005; 2007) identified as a weakness in the community-embedded learning approach. However, since participation in such discussions would ideally be voluntary rather than mandatory, program staff would need to be skilled at designing and facilitating online discussions so that enough learners participated to make them worthwhile. This would include being mindful of the sensitivities that might be involved in sharing life-context experiences and interactions for some participants and providing them with advice on how to negotiate these successfully. As Kazmer (2005) notes, the extent of learning benefit to be gained from such discussions depends in significant part on the number of learners that share their experiences, so the role of teachers in encouraging participation is vital.

To gauge what participants in this study thought of the idea of being encouraged to engage in online discussions about their program-related life-context experiences and interactions, those participants interviewed a second time were asked for their opinions. All responded positively, although several alluded to the need for such discussions to be designed and facilitated in a way that was manageable and enjoyable. Natalie, for example, cautioned, “I’d also be worried if there was too much interaction or perhaps criticism from other learners — that would put me off and that would actually have a negative effect on my learning experience”. Provided such issues are attended to, the findings of this study suggest that online discussions related to life-context experiences and interactions could form a valuable component of distance education programs developed using a connected learning design.

### 9.4 Summary

The findings from this study refine the conceptualisation of distance learners’ personal and professional life-contexts and life-context interactions presented earlier in this thesis by showing how participants interacted with people in their professional life, home life and social life about the academic content of their studies, but not with other people in their
broader communities. The study instead found that their community life influenced their propensity to engage in life-context interactions by establishing the broader setting within which they lived and studied and the nature of the people within it. The study also supports and significantly adds to the limited evidence in the literature of the learning contributions made by these interactions by showing how participants engaged in five different types of life-context interactions that collectively corresponded with seven of the eight categories in a reconfigured version of Fink’s (2003) taxonomy of significant learning. By providing evidence that the learning contributions made by life-context interactions are valuable and meaningful, the findings of this study challenge aspects of the discourse surrounding theories and models of interaction in distance education and suggest there may be value in developing new models and approaches that embrace interactions beyond the formal learning context. Towards this end, a more holistic way of conceptualising learning in distance education has been proposed that draws upon Mejias’ (2005) notion of a pedagogy that validates nearness and embraces interactions between learners and other actors not only within, but also beyond, the formal learning context. An alternative model of the learner interaction modes that contribute to learning in distance education programs has also been presented, along with a new connected learning approach to the design of distance education programs, which adapts and builds upon the work of Kazmer’s (2005; 2007) and draws upon people and resources both within and beyond the learning context. While it is not expected that such an approach would be appropriate for all distance education programs or learners, it is hoped it might offer distance educators an additional approach to consider, particularly when designing programs for postgraduate coursework learners.

This chapter has concluded the presentation and discussion of findings from this study. The next chapter concludes this thesis by providing a reflective summary of the study’s outcomes, limitations and potential implications for future research.
Chapter 10: Conclusion

To conclude this thesis, this chapter provides a summary of the study’s findings and examines the contribution of the chosen research design to the study’s outcomes. It also identifies the limitations of this study’s scope, design and execution and discusses the implications of its findings for future research directions both within and beyond distance education.

10.1 Summary of study findings

The purpose of this study was to develop a conceptual understanding of the occurrence and potential learning contributions of the interactions that occur between working professionals enrolled in postgraduate coursework distance education programs and a variety of people in their everyday lives about the academic content of their studies. Using a concept development theoretical framework, this study began by proposing that the term ‘personal and professional life-context’ be adopted to refer to distance learners’ everyday lives in place of the plethora of terms currently in use, and that the associated term ‘life-context interactions’ be adopted to refer to distance learners’ interactions with people in this realm. Drawing upon evidence from the distance education literature, the study also proposed the following working definitions to accompany these terms:

Personal and professional life-context — Refined definition
The everyday personal and professional lives of distance learners that comprise three spheres: their personal life involving their immediate and extended family members, their friends and acquaintances and their wider community connections; their professional life involving their work colleagues, managers and organisational leaders as well as their wider network of industry peers and professional associates; and their broader community setting encompassing their locality, culture, religion and socio-economic context.

Life-context interactions — Refined definition
Interactions occurring between distance learners and other people in their personal and professional lives about their studies, including their immediate and extended family members, their friends, acquaintances and community
connections, their work colleagues, managers and organisational leaders, and their and wider network of industry peers and professional associates.

Using the interpretative phenomenological analysis research approach, the study then explored the occurrence and learning contributions of these interactions from the perspective of fourteen working professionals completing postgraduate coursework distance education programs delivered by two Australian higher education institutions. It found that twelve of the fourteen participants engaged in one or more of the five types of life-context interactions listed below, and that each of these contributed to their learning in a variety of ways that accorded with the categories of learning set out in a reconfigured version of Fink’s (2003) taxonomy of significant learning.

1. Gathering information for assignments, which primarily contributed to the development of participants’ integration skills by helping them to connect the academic content of their studies to relevant knowledge and practices in their professional life-contexts.

2. Getting help with program content, which primarily contributed to the development of participants’ foundational knowledge in units that covered unfamiliar content, and also helped them to utilise the practical or critical thinking skills needed to complete an assignment.

3. Discussing the application of content to real-world issues, which primarily contributed to the development of participants’ thinking skills and integration skills by extending their learning process beyond the formal distance learning context and exploring how the academic content applied to matters that concerned them.

4. Getting feedback on assignment drafts, which primarily contributed to the improvement of participants’ written communication and critical thinking skills by improving their grammar and expression and highlighting any weaknesses in their argument or the way in which it was presented.

5. Sharing knowledge with others, which primarily contributed to the development of participants’ integration skills by either exposing them to other perspectives and opinions or encouraging them to make connections between their studies and their professional life-contexts.
The study also found that participants varied considerably in the extent to which they engaged in life-context interactions and identified four key factors that influenced their level of engagement.

1. The nature of the learner’s life-context and the extent to which it contained people who could relate to, understand and discuss various issues or concepts associated with the academic content of their studies.

2. The degree of linkage between the learner’s work and studies, including the learner’s primary motivations for studying, the degree of support they received for their studies from their employer and the extent to which they were able to make immediate use of the knowledge and skills gained from their studies in their work-role.

3. The design and content of the postgraduate program the learner was studying and the extent to which it encouraged them to link the academic content to the real-world and talk to other people in life-context about the academic content of their studies.

4. The learner’s disposition and attitudes towards discussing their studies with other people in their life, including the extent to which they perceived other people would be interested in engaging in such interactions and the degree of value such interactions might hold.

The findings of this study challenge the tendency for the discourse surrounding theories and models of interaction in distance education to sideline discussion of those interactions that occur beyond the bounds of the formal learning context. By providing evidence that the learning contributions made by life-context interactions are valuable and sometimes unique, this study demonstrates there may be value in developing new models and approaches that acknowledge and embrace such interactions. Towards this end, this study has proposed a more holistic way of conceptualising learning in distance education that draws upon Mejias’ (2005) notion of a pedagogy that validates nearness and embraces interactions between learners and other actors not only within, but also beyond, the formal learning context. It has also presented an alternative model of the learner interaction modes that contribute to learning in distance education programs, along with a new connected learning approach to the design of distance education programs, which adapts and builds upon the work of Kazmer (2005; 2007) and draws upon people and resources both within and beyond the learning context. As a starting point for considering how the
connected learning design approach might be implemented, the study concluded by proposing and discussing the following four learning strategies that were explored with participants during the course of this study:

1. Authentic assessments related to real-world issues and scenarios.
2. Professional mentoring relationships with workplace or industry leaders or superiors.
3. Coaching relationships that support the development of written and practical skills.
4. Online discussions related to life-context experiences and interactions.

10.2 Contribution of research design

The research design chosen for this study featured a concept development theoretical framework adapted from the work of Walker and Avant (2011) and others in the field of nursing, in conjunction with the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) research approach developed by Smith and others in the field of health psychology (Smith, 1996; Smith & Osborn, 2003; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). These may seem unusual choices for a study in the field of distance education. However, neither concept development nor IPA include features that preclude them from being adapted for use in other disciplines and both have been used previously by researchers undertaking studies outside these disciplinary areas (for example the IPA study in e-learning by Creanor, Trinder, Gowan & Howells, 2006 and the concept development study in library and information science by Fleming-May, 2008).

For this study, the concept development theoretical framework provided a formalised, rigorous and transparent process through which to label and define the concepts of distance learners’ personal and professional life-contexts and life-context interactions rather than making somewhat arbitrary and idiosyncratic choices and contributing to current problem of arbitrary conceptual synonymy that has helped to obscure these concepts and cause them to be overlooked. The concept development framework also helped clarify the difference between disciplinary concepts and ordinary language concepts and led to the realisation that this study focused on the former rather than the latter. This, in turn, facilitated the selection of IPA as the most appropriate research approach for this study because it was congruent with the study of emergent disciplinary concepts and matched the study’s underpinning contextualist epistemological position. IPA’s strong idiographic focus helped shape the interpretation of data gathered during the exploratory
Chapter 10: Conclusion

phase of this project and the presentation of the resultant findings. It led to the decision to include quotes in each participant’s profile and to develop a series of idiographic examples to illustrate the factors influencing participants’ engagement in life-context interactions. By encouraging researchers to move beyond interpretive description and engage in analysis, IPA also made it possible for this study to develop a more complete understanding of the learning contributions of distance learners’ life-context interactions by exploring how the participants’ perceptions of these learning contributions corresponded with established learning theories and taxonomies, such as Fink’s (2003) taxonomy of significant learning. IPA furthermore facilitated the exploration of the implications of this study’s findings for distance education theories, models and design, which led to the proposal of a more holistic way of conceptualising learning in distance education along with an alternative model of learner interaction modes and a new approach to the design of distance education programs. None of these things would have been possible had a different phenomenological research approach been chosen, because each of the other approaches precludes researchers from exploring the linkages between descriptions of phenomena and disciplinary theory. The decision to combine IPA and concept development thus may have been an unusual research design choice for this study, but it played a critical role in ensuring that this study was conducted with enough rigour, depth and methodological congruence for its findings to be considered potentially useful or interesting by distance education theorists and practitioners.

In addition to combining the concept development framework with IPA, the research design for this study also featured the use of telephone and Skype interviews as the main data collection method, something that seems to be a less common choice for both distance education and interview research. While the decision to use these interview modes was based in large part on a pragmatic acceptance of the impracticality of interviewing far-flung participants face-to-face, it also reflected a belief that the mode of interviewing would not diminish the quality or value of the interview data because distance learners would be comfortable with technology-mediated communication and many of the advantages of face-to-face communication could be gained through modern telecommunication technologies such as Skype. This belief was borne out by the resulting interview data, with those interviews conducted face-to-face turning out to be of less value than many of those conducted by telephone or Skype. The three factors that emerged as most influencing the
quality and value of the interview data were rather the extent of each participant’s engagement in life-context interactions, their capacity as conversational partners and the degree of skill with which I carried out each interview. Telephone and Skype interviews thus not only made this study practicable but also were effective as a method of data collection. This information might be of interest to other researchers considering whether to use interviewing as a data collection method with populations that are widely dispersed and difficult or prohibitively expensive to interview face-to-face.

10.3 Study limitations

The scope of this study was limited to conceptualising and exploring the phenomenon of distance learners’ life-context interactions from the perspective of post-experience working professionals enrolled in postgraduate coursework programs delivered largely or wholly by distance education, but not from the perspective of other types of distance learners such as pre-experience university graduates or those enrolled in vocational education and training programs, undergraduate programs, less professionally-focused postgraduate coursework programs or postgraduate research programs. It also focused on those life-context interactions that relate to the academic content of the learners’ studies but did not explore those life-context interactions that relate to other more general aspects of their study experiences. The chosen study design used a qualitative research approach to develop a better understanding of the form and significance of this phenomenon, rather than to measure its incidence. This means the number of participants involved was small and limits the extent to which the findings of this study can be generalised to other learners and contexts.

While the professionals who participated in this study were enrolled in ten different postgraduate coursework programs delivered by two different universities, none of these programs were designed using predominantly social-constructivist principles and encouraged or required learners to engage in high levels of interaction with other learners. Although there is no evidence that this affected the participants’ experience of engaging in life-context interactions about the academic content of their studies, in some cases it did mean they had interacted little with other learners and so were limited in their ability to comment on the ways in which their life-context interactions were similar to or different than their interactions with other learners. The sample of programs represented was also
limited to certain disciplines, which means that the experiences of professionals from disciplines such as engineering and the health sciences are not represented. Any limitations in the number and variety of participants sampled, however, also represent an opportunity for future researchers to explore and refine this concept with other types of distance learners or other research approaches.

10.4 Suggestions for future research directions

By demonstrating the utility of the concepts of life-contexts and life-context interactions when applied to working professionals undertaking postgraduate coursework programs by distance education, this study opens several avenues for further research into these concepts. First, there is a need for additional studies that explore the learning contributions of life-context interactions for a wider range of distance learners, including professionals and non-professionals undertaking vocational education and training programs, undergraduate programs, postgraduate research programs and postgraduate coursework programs in other fields not addressed by this study. Second, it would be useful if further research were undertaken that explored in greater depth the relative learning contributions of life-context interactions in comparison with that of other types of learner interactions in distance education, as well as the particular strengths and weaknesses of each type of interaction. While this study offers some insights in this regard, a deeper understanding could likely be gained from studies with a more explicitly comparative focus. Third, there may be value in revisiting Kember’s (1995; 1999) model of student progress in distance education in light of the findings of this study and considering whether to expand its conceptualisation of the process of integration to encompass the learner seeking both affective and academic support for their studies from people in their life-contexts. Fourth, there may be value in revisiting the literature related to the affective support available to distance learners and exploring the utility of the concepts of life-contexts and life-context interactions when applied to this domain. Finally, there may be value in investigating whether the general concepts of life-contexts and life-context interactions have utility when applied to other types of learners and educational settings that share similar characteristics and dynamics. These might include higher education students that are completing their studies by a blended combination of distance and on-campus education, and on-campus higher education students that are either studying part-time, combining their studies with substantial part-time employment or undertaking programs that involve work-integrated
learning strategies that require them to engage with people beyond the learning context. They also might include students undertaking workplace education or continuing professional development programs, and adult learners engaged in other forms of further education.

This thesis additionally points to the possibility of new research directions in distance education pedagogy and design. By showing how Mejias’ (2005) notion of a pedagogy that validates nearness might be used to develop a more holistic way of conceptualising learning in distance education, and by drawing upon the work of Kazmer (2005; 2007) to propose a new connected learning approach to the design of distance education programs, this thesis offers the distance education research community a new way of approaching the design of community-centred learning environments that leverages real-world communities of practice and provides a role and a place in the learning process for distance learners’ interactions with people who are physically and epistemologically near to them as they integrate their new knowledge and skills into their personal and professional lives. However, further research, theorising and pedagogical discussion is required for these ideas to be developed and incorporated into mainstream practice.
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Appendix: Interview Schedules

A.1 First interview schedule

DEAKIN UNIVERSITY
TO: Participants

Interview Schedule—First Interview

Project Title: Life-context interactions and their contributions to postgraduate distance learning

The following questions will be used as a guide.

1. Can you tell me something about your life and the context surrounding your studies?

2. What made you decide to enrol in a postgraduate program, and why did you choose to study by distance education?

3. Since you’ve been studying, who are the people in your home life and your working life that you’ve had conversations with about the academic content of your studies? How regularly have you had these sorts of conversations?

4. Can you tell me in as much detail as possible about a particular example of when you have done this?
   • What unit were you studying at the time?
   • Who did you talk to and what did you talk about?
   • What prompted the conversation?
   • Did it contribute to your learning in any way, and if so, how? For example, did it change your understanding of the issues or concepts you were discussing?
   • Did it help you to make connections between your studies and your broader life?
   • Did it provide you with a sense of interconnection between the different spheres of your life?

5. Can you give me any other examples? (As many as you wish)

6. How are these discussions similar to, or different than, the discussions you have had with other learners in your program about the academic content of your studies? For example:
   • Do they occur more frequently, or less frequently, than discussions with other learners?
   • Do you talk about similar things or different things?
   • Do they contribute to your learning in similar ways, or different ways, to the discussions you have with other learners?
   • Do these discussions make a greater or lesser contribution to your learning and your understanding of course content?
7. Is there anything else you’d like to add at this point, or anything you think I should have asked you that I haven’t?

A.2 Composite second interview schedule

DEAKIN UNIVERSITY
TO: Participants

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Interview Schedule—Second Interview</th>
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<td><strong>Project Title:</strong> Life-context interactions and their contributions to postgraduate distance learning</td>
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After analysing the information I collected during the first round of interviews, I’d like to ask you some follow-up questions that broadly divide into three categories:

- Questions designed to fill in or clarify some information about your life-context and your study experience.
- Questions designed to flesh out and explore further some things you said last time or particular examples you gave me.
- Questions designed to test and explore some of my tentative interpretations and ideas.

**Filling in the blanks**

1. Information about your life-context

   1.1. You mentioned that your employer paid for your undergraduate degree, but who has funded your two Masters degrees?

   1.2. You mentioned that your Australian employer subsidised your studies. When you went to [Europe], did you pay for the remainder of your studies yourself?

   1.3. How did moving to [Europe] affect your ability to interact with other people in your life about your studies?

   1.4. You mentioned that your dad works in the livestock industry, what industry does your brother work in?

   1.5. Would you normally talk to your friends/family about what you’re doing in your working life? If so, did it feel like a natural thing to also talk with them about aspects of your studies?

   1.6. Would you normally talk to your work colleagues about aspects of your broader life? If so, was it a natural thing to also talk with them about aspects of your studies?
1.7. Was it common for other people in your workplace(s) to be undertaking further education?

1.8. How would you describe the prevailing attitude towards further education amongst people in your workplace(s)?

1.9. How would you describe the attitudes that people in your workplace have towards your studies? Are they generally positive and supportive?

1.10. When we last spoke you didn’t mention talking to any of your friends/family members about the academic content of your studies. Did you talk to any of them about it?

1.11. Have any of your family or friends undertaken further education/postgraduate study?

1.12. Tell me more about both your current working environment and the environment when you were with the [Department]. Do you work as part of a team or do you work fairly independently? Have you had any colleagues that are peers that you could talk with about aspects of your studies?

1.13. Do you work in an open plan space with your colleagues, or do you all work in individual offices?

1.14. Are you part of any sort of professional network? If so, do you discuss aspects of the academic content of your studies with any members of that network?

1.15. Did you do your undergraduate degree on-campus? If so, did you interact much with other learners about the academic content of your studies? Why or why not? How and why does this differ from what you did for your postgraduate qualification?

2. Information about the program structure and interactions with the learners and lecturers

2.1. Did your course include an option for you to attend on-campus residentials or workshops in city-based hotels? If so, did you attend any of these? Why or why not?

2.2. If you attended residentials or workshops, did you interact much with other learners there, and what was your experience of this?

2.3. You mentioned that some of your units can be studied through two-week residential schools but you have chosen not to do this because you can’t afford to take the time off work and don’t want to use your annual leave for study. Would you have attended a shorter on-campus workshop if it had been structured as a long weekend?

2.4. Did any of the units that you studied include an option for you to participate in web-based teleconferences of some kind with the lecturer and other learners? If so, did you participate in any of these? Why or why not?
2.5. If you did participate in any web-based teleconferences, what was your experience like and did you interact much with the other learners that were participating?

2.6. Did you interact at all with other learners through online discussion forums? Why or why not?

2.7. Thinking about the assignments you completed, did many of them involve applying the course content to the ‘real world’ or did they tend to be more theoretical?

2.8. Did your assignments generally have to be presented in a conventional essay format or as some form of business report or presentation?

2.9. How much did you interact with the lecturers during your program? What sorts of things did you talk to them about?

2.10. How did these interactions with lecturers contribute to your learning?

Fleshing out the details

3. Further exploring interactions with family and friends

3.1. When we last spoke you talked about the interactions you had with your brother about your studies and how they gave you a deeper insight into his working life, and you also talked about how when you began your studies you were at a career crossroads. Did those conversations with your brother helped you in any way as you wrestled with where to take your career?

3.2. When you spoke with your brother and your father, did you feel you were talking to them in their professional capacities rather than simply as members of your family?

3.3. When you were talking with friends about the academic content of your studies, did those conversations just happen spontaneously or did you sometimes deliberately seek out their views on different issues?

3.4. You spoke last time of how you could be more relaxed when you were talking with friends and have more honest and in-depth conversations. Can you think of a particular example of this sort of interaction that you could share with me — one that you think would have been different if you’d had it with management personnel from your work?
4. Further exploring interactions with colleagues

4.1. You mentioned that you had weekly conversations about your studies with the principal of your second school, can you tell me more about how that came about?

4.2. You talked about how you sought help for your accounting subject from your school’s business manager, would you have done this if you had been studying on-campus, or would you have simply sought help from the lecturer?

4.3. You mentioned that you undertook a survey of staff for your Marketing assignment, can you tell me more about what you surveyed the staff about and how you conducted the survey?

4.4. Thinking about the conversations you had with work colleagues about your studies that significantly contributed to your learning, did these tend to be planned conversations or did they generally occur as an extension of existing work practices and relationships?

4.5. When we last spoke you talked about how the people you work with are asking you questions related to things that you’ve learned, but that sometimes those conversations force you to explore further and learn further. Can you elaborate on that and give me an example of that?

4.6. You spoke about how you’ve been talking to a couple of professors at the [local university] about social enterprise, can you tell me more about how that came about? Did you initiate that contact?

4.7. You spoke last time of how you would sometimes talk about aspects of the academic content of your studies when you are doing inter-agency work / discuss white papers or articles from Harvard Business Review with workplace leaders over a cup of coffee. Can you think of a particular example of this sort of interaction that you could share with me?

4.8. You mentioned that when you were studying the Masters you didn’t talk to your work colleagues much about the academic content of your studies because of issues related to various work pressures and the nature of your job role at the time. Was it also because you were located overseas and away from most of your work colleagues?

4.9. If things had been different at work back then, would you have interacted with your colleagues more about your studies?

4.10. When you were studying the Masters you were teaching a junior team in China using your own experience. Can I clarify whether you shared anything with them that you learnt from your Masters, or was that too advanced for them?

4.11. You said that when you studied the marketing unit you interviewed key leaders in your organisation to gather their ideas on the company’s direction, strengths and weaknesses. Can you tell me how this came about?
4.12. How much did those interactions contribute to your learning? Can you think of a particular example of this sort of interaction that you could share with me?

4.13. You mentioned that you’d had discussions about your studies with colleagues at networking forums, can you tell me more about that? What sorts of things did you discuss and how did those conversations contribute to you learning?

4.14. Since we last spoke, have there been any other examples of discussions you’ve had with your manager/work colleagues about the academic content of your studies that you’d like to share with me?

4.15. When we last spoke you talked about how you sought advice from your colleagues about possible solutions to some assignment problems. Would you have been able to get similar perspectives from the other learners?

4.16. How have your interactions with your colleagues been different to your interactions with the other learners in the program?

4.17. Would you have talked to your work colleagues as much about your studies if you had been able to interact more with other learners in the program?

4.18. How would your learning experience have been different if you had not had those interactions with your colleagues about the academic content of your studies?

4.19. Have your studies changed your relationship with your colleagues/manager in any way?

4.20. You talked about how a conversation with your manager about ethical frameworks led to a transformation in your relationship with the owner and your level of satisfaction at work. How did that affect your perception of the value of theory?

4.21. Given that you’re an HR manager and you’re currently working as a sole practitioner, would it be fair to say that your manager is one of the few people within your workplace that you could realistically talk to about the academic content of your studies?

5. Further exploring interactions with learners and lecturers

5.1. Can you tell me more about the conversations you had with the other learners when you attended the weekend workshop in Sydney. What sort of things did you talk about and what sort of things did you learn? How valuable were those conversations, and why?

5.2. During our last conversation you talked about how you weren’t particularly active on the online forums. What was the reason for that?

5.3. Given that during you haven’t interacted a lot with other learners or other people in your life about your studies, what role does talking with other people play in your learning process?
5.4. Thinking about what you learnt from your interactions with other people in your life during both your undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, could you have gained those things by talking more with the other learners or your lecturers? Why or why not?

5.5. Last time you talked about how there were a lot of interactions happening between learners in the unit you were studying because one of the other learners worked in forensics. Can you tell me more about those discussions? What sorts of things did you discuss? How did those discussions contribute to your learning?

5.6. You said something important about how when you do interact with other learners online, you don’t say what you would have said face-to-face because it takes too long to type it. Can you tell me about that again?

5.7. You mentioned that because of your study habits you tended to isolate yourself from the other learners in the program. Did you have any interactions with other learners at all?

5.8. From our last conversation I gained the impression that when you were studying, even though you were aware that you weren’t interacting with the other learners, it wasn’t something that concerned you at the time. Is that a fair observation? If so, why was that the case?

5.9. During our last conversation you also talked about how you felt the lecturers were quite distant and you would have liked more contact with them. Can you tell me more about what you feel you missed out on because of the absence of those interactions?

5.10. You talked about how you enjoyed the two teleconferences that occurred during your studies, can you tell me more about that? What subjects were they for? What was the purpose of the teleconferences?

5.11. During your current course you’ve been attending compulsory residentials. How long is each of the residentials and how are they structured?

5.12. Have the compulsory residentials caused you to interact more with other learners about the academic content of the program? If so, what sort of things are you talking about? How has this changed your study experience?

6. Further exploring the learning experience

6.1. Was your learning experience a satisfying one? Did you ever feel that it was a solitary or lonely experience?

6.2. Other participants have talked about how they came to realise they were missing out on the ‘buzz’ of studying on campus, and the sense of being part of a collegiate. Did you feel that at all?

6.3. Has your study experience caused you to grow and change as a person? Would you describe your study experience as transformative?
6.4. Thinking about how you interacted a lot with other people in your life about your studies and how you also enjoyed the two teleconferences that were held and proactively went out of your way to visit the university campus and meet with a lecturer, does this mean that talking with other people is an important part of how you learn? Do you prefer to be able to see and hear people rather than only interacting through text?

7. Further exploring the contributions of life-context interactions

7.1. Towards the end of our last conversation you talked about how the conversations with your work colleagues and family members, “really helped me keep my feet on the ground and not get sucked up into the ether of the academic ivory tower with all theory-base”. Tell me more about why you think you could have been sucked up into the ether with theory? And did those conversations also help you to evaluate the practical worth and applicability of the various theories?

7.2. Last time you indicated that your learning experience would have been poorer if you had not had those interactions with other people in your life about the academic content of your studies. Can you elaborate on that?

7.3. How would your learning experience have been different if you had not had those interactions with other people in your life about the academic content of your studies?

7.4. Did those interactions give you a sense of being able to share you studies with other people in your life and bring together and connect the different spheres in your life?

Testing interpretations and ideas

8. During our last interview it became clear that you’re interacting with other people in your life about the academic content of your studies [to X degree], and it seems that this is in large part because: [reasons selected and tailored from the following]

- There was a clear linkage between your studies and your job role which meant you had an opportunity to make immediate use of the skills and knowledge gained from your studies.

- Your employer(s) supported your studies by giving you financial assistance / encouragement / practical support.

- You had work colleagues/managers who had confidence in your abilities and were interested in hearing about and making use of the new knowledge/skills/perspectives you gained from your studies, particularly when it had bearing on issues at work.

- You had access to work colleagues/senior managers who were willing and able to either discuss and help you with various issues or concepts associated with the academic content of your studies, provide you with information to help you
complete assignments, or read and comment on your assignment drafts and assist you with grammar and expression.

- There are people in your organisation or family that are currently studying or have completed further studies and are able to relate to, discuss and share aspects of your learning experience.

- You have friends or family who are supportive of your educational endeavours and whose jobs, interests and experience enable them to relate to, understand and discuss various issues or concepts associated with the academic content of your studies.

- You value and enjoy learning and you proactively seek out opportunities to talk with other people in your life-context about your studies as a means of gathering information, exploring the application of theory in practice and creating linkages between the different spheres of your life.

- The design and structure of the program you were enrolled in included learning and assessment activities that required you to apply the content to real-world contexts and present the results as usable business reports.

- Your studies have increased your interest and engagement with business matters, politics and current affairs as well as giving you greater in confidence in your knowledge, abilities and opinions, and this has led you to proactively seek out opportunities to talk with other people in your life-context about general topics related to your studies in a way you would not have done previously.

- You have self-funded your studies primarily to expand your career options and have not sought the support or assistance of your employers.

- Your studies relate more to the fields of work you’d like to get into and only have limited applicability to your current job role.

- The pressures of your work role and the changes that were occurring in your organisation meant you had little time to seek out the views of your colleagues on study-related matters.

- The nature of your work role at the time led you to focus more on teaching others rather than learning from others.

- The content of your Masters related to matters you were familiar with which meant you had less need to seek out the views and knowledge of others.

- You did not think to seek out a mentor from within your organisation to help support and guide you with your studies, and there was nothing in the design of your study program to prompt or encourage you to do so.

- Few/none of your work colleagues have undertaken postgraduate education and you feel uncomfortable talking with them about your studies because they are unlikely to place a value on the knowledge gained through your studies.
• Your friends/family find it difficult to relate to your studies because they have not undertaken postgraduate education / work in a different industry / do not have jobs, interests or experiences that are relevant to your studies.

• Your family lives in another country making it difficult to discuss your studies with them.

• When you are with your friends and family you prefer to either share the highs and lows of your study experience and receive their moral support or take time out from your studies and talk about other things.

Is that a fair interpretation? Is there anything that isn’t quite right or any other factors you think I’ve missed?

9. During our last interview it also became clear that you’re interacting with other learners in your program about the academic content of your studies [to X degree], and it seems that this is in large part because: [reasons selected and tailored from the following]

• The design of the program encourages and facilitates participation in dialogic online discussions with other learners.

• You are interested in connecting with other learners and hearing their perspectives and opinions and you are comfortable interacting with other people online.

• The design of the program and the facilitation style of most of the lecturers generally didn’t emphasise/require participation in dialogic online discussions with other learners and you found the few interactions that did occur on the online forums to be static and unappealing.

• The design of the program centred around the completion of individual assessments, some of which required you to apply the content to your organisational context, rather than collaborative assessments that required you to interact with other learners.

• The design of the program makes little or limited use of webinars or online teleconferences, and any that were held were not at times when it was convenient for you to participate.

• The design of the program did not include face-to-face residential or workshops.

• The design of the program made limited use of face-to-face residentials or workshops, but the one you did attend was not designed in a way that encouraged dialogic interaction with other learners.

• The on-campus residentials that were offered required you to give up an excessive amount of work time or annual leave and outlay a significant amount of money, thus making it unrealistic for you to attend.

• Your main motivations for attending city-based workshops were to absorb program content, catch up with city-based friends and family and do some shopping in a large city rather than sharing the experience with other learners.

• Your working hours or your study style made it difficult for you to engage in online discussions with other learners in a timely fashion.
• You were more oriented towards utilising, building upon and deepening your existing relationships and connections rather than developing new connections and relationships with other learners.

• Your interactions with other people in your life-context about your studies were satisfying and fulfilling enough that you did not find the learning experience lonely or isolating and so did not feel much need to interact with other learners.

• You are interested in connecting with other learners and hearing their perspectives and opinions, but you find online interactions time-consuming and artificial, or you are uncomfortable interacting with other people online when you’ve never met them or don’t know them very well and prefer to interact face-to-face either in real life or through video-based online technologies.

• You didn’t initially realise the value of interacting with other learners and so only began to proactively engage in online discussions partway through the program.

• You were focused on applying the academic content of the program to your own context and were less interested / felt that it would cloud your vision and lead to information overload if you were to explore its application to other learners’ often very different contexts.

• You don’t place a high value on the views of other learners who you see as no more knowledgeable than yourself, preferring instead to interact with experts in the field or people who have practical experience with applications of the theoretical concepts you are studying.

• You preferred to seek out the views and perspectives of your manager who knows your work context rather than those of the other learners in the program who do not.

• You had a negative experience with interacting with other learners and this made you hesitant and wary about engaging in other such interactions.

• You live in a regional/rural town and were unable to find any other learners in your local area with whom you could meet and talk about study-related issues.

• You accepted that as a distance learner you needed to be very independent.

Is that a fair interpretation? Is there anything that isn’t quite right or any other factors you think I’ve missed?

10. How would you have responded if some of the units in your program directed you to try to talk to appropriate people in your home-life, your work-life, or the broader industry in which you work, about the application of particular theories in practice and then discuss what you learned with the lecturer and the other learners through online conferences or forums?

10.1. Could you have found such people to talk to?

10.2. If so, would you have been willing to seek out such people and initiate this type of conversation?

10.3. Would you have been willing to discuss what you learned from these conversations through either ‘real-time’ online web-conferences that were
scheduled several times a study period or ‘anytime’ text-based online forums that you could access and contribute to whenever you wished?

10.4. If you could not have found such people to talk to, would you have been interested in participating in an online teleconference or forum and hearing what other learners had been able to find out?

10.5. Do you think this sort of activity might have improved your learning experience in any way?

11. If the university you studied with had offered to link you with an industry mentor who was happy to talk with you regularly about the practical application of various study concepts and perhaps provide you with additional feedback on your assignments, how would you have responded? Would you have taken up the offer?

12. Alternatively, if the university had asked you to find your own mentor, how would you have responded? Could you have found such a person? Would this have been beneficial?

And finally…

13. Is there anything else you’d like to add at this point, or anything you think I should have asked you that I haven’t?