Evans, T. (1994). Learners social and educational backgrounds, (Chapter 2, pp. 22-28); and Endframes: uncovering the diversities of learners' contexts, (Chapter 9, pp. 122-133). In Evans, T., Understanding learners in open and distance education. London, UK.: Kogan Page.

Endframes: uncovering the diversities of learners' contexts

As a young school teacher in the early 1970s, I tried to understand my students fairly well. I lived in the same community and I knew some of their parents. I understood what they saw on television, what teams they supported, what games they played, what music they liked. They seemed to be fairly uncomplicated individuals. They had their differences, of course, but they shared so many things in common, including a limited experience of life, that I thought I could teach them pretty well. I was also studying at university part-time for my Masters degree, which gave me a certain empathy with them as we all tried to fit our 'homework' around our pleasures in life.

One day in 1974 I had two new students in one of my classes, they had arrived from Chile and spoke limited English. They sat quietly in class and were model students in every respect except their work, which was poor in comparison with their peers. Their quiet disquieted me. Who were these children? What were they like? How could I get to know them? My enquiries of others and conversations with them over the ensuing weeks helped me to know them, but I realized that the more I knew about them, and the more I knew of the experiences they had undergone, the less I really knew about them. They were refugees from the bloody coup which had overthrown Allende. Their experiences and previous home circumstances were very different from my own and that of my other students. As they were from soccer-saturated South America, I tried to discuss this game and bring some of my other students into the discussion who were from families who also came from soccer-saturated nations. This worked, up to a point, a point at which I reahzed that soccer and soccer grounds signified different things to us. In my childhood, a soccer ground meant going with my father to see Guildford City play, or later to go to Highbury to see the Gunners blaze. For my Chilean students, Santiago soccer stadium meant the place where their fathers (or other relatives) met incarceration, torture and blazing guns. As a young teacher I wasn't sure how to teach people I didn't really understand. My teacher education had encouraged and prepared me to teach in ways which related to students, but *who were these* students? [1]

Now I am working in distance education where we plan courses three years before they are offered and usually tun them for three to five years before a revised or 'remade' version replaces it. Questions that trouble me in distance education are: Who are 'my' students? What will they make of my course? What will they make of it in a few years time? For distance educators, in particular, there is a student void which needs to be filled in order for them to teach. It seems that distance educators fill up this student void with what they imagine their students will be like. But, as this is based substantially on their previous experience, it is difficult to imagine students whom one does not yet know and whose experiences one does not share. This is a major problem when distance educators from the 'developed' world work on creating or updating courses for 'developing' world contexts.[2] The task is easier for the teacher or trainer working in a setting where they have closer contact with the people who will eventually study their courses. Indeed, the curriculum of those courses may well be negotiated or framed in consultation with them. As was mentioned in Chapter 1, such circumstances are pedagogical leaps of faith rather than bungee jumps into an educational abyss, which is more like the distance educator's lot.

Whether working in a classroom, training department, open learning centre, or distance education institution, the question remains for the good teacher or trainer: who are my students? Of course, a

teacher or trainer who poses such a question is moving beyond the 'empty vessel' or 'banking' models of education. [3] They are seeing adult learners as people with histories and contexts which will affect the ways they learn in relation to the way they are taught [4]. The dynamic nature of the teaching - learning process means that when a teacher reaches a good understanding of the learner, their teaching changes and, thus, the learning and the learner also change. The previous chapters demonstrate that it is practically impossible to understand *the learner* at all. Rather it is a case of understanding learners as a diverse, heterogeneous and changing body of people.

The preceding chapters have addressed issues which stem directly from the concerns and contexts of a variety of students, be they to do with gender, age, work, money or whatever. The students' experiences, views and circumstances which have been presented reveal the sort of problem I had as a school teacher with my Chilean students. The more one knows of the diversity of students' experiences, views and circumstances, the more uncertain one becomes as a teacher or trainer. Previous homogeneous conceptions of *the student* are exploded into a galaxy of individual, unique students. The more one finds out, the more one realizes there remains to find out. It is rather like settling down to sleep under the stars in the Australian desert on a moonless night. As one's eyes become more accustomed to the dark, the stars between the stars between the stars become clear. If it wasn't for falling asleep, it appears more stars would b revealed for ever.

However, human cultures have ways of framing human experiences - of stars and students! - so that they can be understood and explained. This book has framed students' experiences into a series of chapters which address themes which the practitioner can use both to understand and to address the issues. On occasions, the overlaps between these frames have been made clear, but often each chapter has tended to focus on its particular themes to the exclusion of the other issues. So, for example, the chapter on gender considered issues that were pertinent to that theme, but issues to do with age, power or money, for instance, are also gendered. The interconnections are very important for understanding students holistically - that is, to see (and teach) students as complete and complex entities whose wholeness is more than the sum of their particular characteristics.-[5] It should also be stated that there were other issues which could have been explored and that the ones covered in this book simply represent the ones that seem
to be most pertinent.

The shape of the book and the ways the issues and students' stories are selected, represented and discussed, stem from the author's experiences and interests. However, there are, of course, the readers' own experiences which both help to frame their personal understandings of the learners' issues in this book, and also help to add to their stock of knowledge of learners' experiences in general. Some of the students' stories in this book will probably harmonize with individual reader's own 'insider' experiences as students, teachers or trainers. Other stories will probably be viewed more as if the reader were an 'outsider'. For the open and distance educator, generally, most of the learners present themselves as 'outsiders' at the outset and the best teachers usually try to bring their students 'inside' their courses using a variety of strategies based on their own personal experiences and predilections.[6] I shall pursue these matters further, starting with the way personal and local knowledge informs our practice and moving to the ways broader, theoretical frames can aid our understanding of students.

Open and distance educators have several ways to fill the student voids which frame their own course development and teaching. They use their 'common-sense' knowledge of previous students, of friends and family who are or who have been students and, perhaps most importantly and most often forgotten, of *themselves* when they were students. These sorts of personal knowledge of being a learner are very important in the teaching process for those who have to teach at a distance. Distance educators project into the student void an array of knowledge of the student experiences which enables them to prejudge the learning encounters which will occur sometime in the future. In effect, every teacher or trainer does this when they plan their classes; however, face-to-face teachers also have actual experiences of their students - or good 'intelligence' in the way that Liz Curie exemplifies in Chapter 1 - which they can use in their planning, and they have the interactive capacity in the classroom to vary their teaching in response to the students' needs.

Given that personal experience and knowledge of learners forms an important part of the open and distance educators' resources, it seems important for the good teacher or trainer to do two things. One is to recognize explicitly that their experience and knowledge is important to their work, whether or not this has been visible or invisible in the past. The other is to reflect critically on that knowledge and experience by setting it against the sorts of diversity of students' experiences we have seen in previous chapters. [7] Thus, by comparing one's own experiences and knowledge of learners with those of someone whose actual learning experience is quite different, then the taken-for-granted assumptions about what counts as good teaching for all students, based on the the assumed 'known' student, are called into question. Don Markovitz, in Chapter 1, called some of his experiences into question in this way. The students' stories in this book have shown that, for instance, while some students study because it fits with their work and they receive paid leave and financial support from their employers for doing so, others are studying for entirely personal reasons, in their own time and entirely at their own expense.

It is deceptively easy to develop courses on the basis of taken-for-granted assumptions about students' circumstances, such as their access to libraries or study centres, spare time to study, reading and writing abilities, interests in the subject, physical abilities, etc. However, the previous chapters show that, for such assumptions, there are many possible variations, some of which will render the assumptions incorrect and counterproductive for a number of students' learning. For example, some students find that their work and family commitments make it very difficult to obtain sufficient 'quality time' for their studies; others have mobility or Transport difficulties which effectively prevent their access to libraries or study centres. Courses which are planned on the assumption that all students will have sufficient 'quality time' and access to libraries and study centres, are *designed to fail,* or rather they are *designed to fail* some of *their students.* Such design and development faults should be anathema to good teachers, but especially to open educators who (should) have as one of their goals openness to the needs and contexts of their students. The problem is that if such educators work on the uncritical use of their personal knowledge and experience, they risk designing to fail.

Apart from reflecting critically on one's knowledge and experiences of learners, there are also deliberate ways that educators and their institutions can go about understanding the diversity of learners' experiences and contexts. Typically, institutional surveys are used to evaluate courses or educational services. Sometimes, forms of 'market' surveys are used prior to course approval or accreditation to ascertain the need for a proposed course, but often these are sent to experts in the field, employers or professional bodies rather than to prospective students. It is often difficult for educational institutions to survey prospective students for exactly the reason raised in Chapter 1. That is, especially in open and distance education where long lead-times are the rule, the 'prospective' students do not even know of the possibility of the course at that stage, so how can an institution identify and survey such people? Of course, it is possible, especially on courses which are likely to appeal to a defined clientele, such as an occupational group or a group with an existing educational need (for example, a job skills course or an English as a second language course), to send a survey to people who are likely to be prospective students.

It is also the case that some forms of market survey are, at least partly, about creating a prospective market. So an institution which surveys prospective students may actually be beginning the process of constructing those people into future students. The blanket survey, which is distributed generally but which requires people to return their responses and has the option of including their name and address 'so that we can keep you informed about this new exciting development', is providing the institution with a database for its first pre-enrolment mailing. For people working in industrial settings, the 'market' survey is typically aimed at specific groups in the workplace and also has the effect of creating a perceived need or demand for the intended course. This is not to suggest that, in both the industrial and institutional contexts, such surveys represent a self-serving attempt on the part of the educators to create a course and, therefore, work and income for themselves. Rather, educational entrepreneurialism requires not only good judgements about community and industrial needs for education and training, but also good implementation processes, which include forms of 'marketing'.

One important potential of the approaches which open and distance educators make to prospective students through surveys, meetings with prospective students, etc., is the capacity to understand more of the experiences and contexts of those prospective students. It seems that there is often a concern for making the curriculum relevant and shaping the assessment to fit, for example, people's work or professional contexts. However, there is a capacity to begin the process of ascertaining something of the diversity of the student clientele. The preceding chapters in this book have opened up the key areas which could be pursued. For example, issues to do with age, gender and family relationships, money, social and educational backgrounds could be investigated. Using this information - and there is no point in collecting the information unless it is used [8] - can have a significant impact on the teaching and learner support strategies employed on a course. This seems to be especially important for open educators because their proclaimed intention to be 'open' implies that they need to understand what counts as openness in the experience of the learners. In order to be open to a diversity of students requires understanding, from the outset, what this diversity means for their practices as open educators. In this book, the significance of the diversity of learners' experiences and contexts has been revealed and the open and distance educator can use this knowledge to frame their planning and course development phases, including the use of strategies to find out *who* are their prospective students.

One of the matters which has unfolded in the course of this book is the way in which learners change and develop as they engage with their courses. This is particularly the case for those on fairly lengthy part-time degree programmes which span several years, but there is evidence of smaller changes, too, for those on courses of shorter duration.[9] We have seen that some of these changes affect the students deeply such that their personal and family relationships are permanently altered. Other changes are more directly related to the learning which takes place on the courses and the ways in which the students adapt to their new knowledge and skills.

Therefore, understanding the diversity of students is not simply a case of, for example, surveying or interviewing students as they enrol, or of being a first year tutor receptive to the broader nature of students' contexts. The former is merely a cross-section at a given point in time and the tutor's receptivity is a mere thread of encounters with (usually) a fragment of the student community. It is analogous to attempting to understand global weather processes using an array of readings at one point in time or, in the tutor's case, from a set of readings over a period of time from one weather station. The global weather system is a dynamic system which has certain repetitive general patterns (seasons, for example) and it is very difficult to understand and predict. Adult learners *en masse* are every bit as difficult to understand and predict and yet we need to do so with a reasonable degree of certainly, to be good educators. At the local level, this means ensuring that we actually do sufficient regular research to maintain reliable 'recordings' and accurate 'forecasts'.[10] More broadly, it means having practice and research-based understandings (theories) about adult open and distance education learners' experiences and contexts. [11]

So here lies the challenge for open and distance educators. Adult students *en masse* are as dynamic and chaotic as the global weather system. The preceding chapters have featured some of the major issues which stem from students' accounts of the diversity of their learning experiences and contexts. In this chapter it has been argued that, in order to be good open and distance educators, understanding students' experiences and contexts needs to be a process which is sustained from the course development and pre-enrolment phases, through the learning phases, to course completion. The challenge is to develop and maintain approaches which enable students to have their voices heard and for the open and distance educators and their institutions to be able to listen and understand the practical implications of what is being said. Learners should also recognize that they are part of a diverse body of people whose interests need to be voiced, and whose stories need to be told.

Notes

1   Tait, A (ed.) 7he Student, Community and Curriculum: Proceedings of the Intentional *Perspectives on Open and Distance Education conference,* University of Cambridge, September.

2   Several commentators have elaborated on this point. See, for example, Ansu-Kyeremeh, K (1991) 'Distance education in a developing context: Ghana' in Evans, T D and King, B (eds) *Beyond the Text: Contemporary writing on distance education,* Geelong: Deakin University Press, pp. 137-51; Arger, G (1985) 'Promise and reality: a critical analysis of literature on distance education in the Third World', Journal *of Distance Education, 2,* 1, 41-58; Guy, R (1991) 'Distance education and the developing world', in Evans, T D and King, B (eds) *Beyond the text: Contemporary writing on distance education,* Geelong: Deakin University Press, pp. 152-75; Guy, R (1992) 'Distance education in Papua New Guinea: reflections on reality', *Open Learning, 7,* 1, 28-39.

3   Paulo Freire used the notion of 'banking education' to typify what is a dominant form of education in modernist societies. From this viewpoint knowledge (cash) is deposited in the minds (accounts) of people for them to use productively (derive interest). See Freire, P *(1972) Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* Harmondsworth: Penguin. Helen Modra has discussed this and other of Freire's ideas in relation to her work in distance education. See, Modra, H (1989) 'Using journals to encourage critical thinking at a distance', in Evans, T D and Nation, D E (eds) *Critical Reflections on Distance Edt4cation,* London: Falmer Press, pp. 123-46. Instructional design can be criticized for reflecting a 'banking' model of education. It is concerned with framing the educational process in terms of the knowledge to be deposited, hence a good deal of 'investment planning' takes place in the form of concept mapping and the like. However, for the approach to education I am adopting in this book, and in my teaching, I believe it is important to see learners as human agents in the (their) educational processes who will, whether we like it or not, this and related matters in some detail. See Evans, T D and Nation, D E (1989) 'Critical reflections in distance education', in Evans T D and Nation D E (eds) *Critical Reflections on Distance Education,* London: Falmer Press, pp. 23752; Evans, T D and
        Nation, D E (1 989) 'Dialogue in practice, research and theory in distance education', *Open Learning,* 4, 2, 37-43; Evans, T D and Nation, D E (1992) 'Theorising open
and distance education, *Open Learning, 7,* 2, 3-13 (republished in Tait, A (ed.) (1993) *Key Issues in Open Learning,* London: Longman, pp. 45-62).

4   There are several writers who have addressed approaches to educating adults which see the process as requiring not only receptivity to the learners' contexts, but also a recognition of the dynamic (and, for some, empowering) nature of the teaching-learning process. As one might expect, there are also differences between the approaches espoused by these authors; however, a selection from some of the key figures would include the following: Boud, D and Griffin, V (eds) (1987) *Appreciating Adults Learning,* London: Kogan Page; Boud, D, Keogh, R and Walker, D (eds) (1985) *Reflection: Turning experience into Learning,* London: Kogan Page; Brookfield, S (1986) *Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning,* San Francisco-. Jossey Bass; Brookfield, S (1987) *Developing Critical Thinkers: Challenging adults to explore alternative ways of thinking and acting,* San Francisco: Jossey Bass; Knowles, M (1978) 7'he *Adult Learner. A neglected species,* Houston: Gulf Publishing; Knowles, M (1980) 7'he *Modern Practice of adult Education,* Chicago: Association Press; Mezirow, j *(1991) Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning,* San Francisco: Jossey Bass; Mezirow, j and associates (1 *990) Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood: A guide to transformative and emancipatory learning,* San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
Liz Burge and Margaret Haughey, both separately and jointly, have brought adult learning theories to bear on distance education. See, for example, Burge, L (1988) 'Beyond andragogy- some explorations for distance learning design', *Journal of Distance Education, 3,* 1, 5-23; Burge, L and Haughey, M (1

993) 'Transformative learning in reflective practice', in Evans, T D and Nation, D E (eds) *Refomning Open and Distance Education,* London: Kogan Page, pp. 88-112; Haughey, M (1991) 'Confronting the pedagogical issues', *Open Learning,* 6, 3, 14-23.

5   There has been a growing body of research and writting which has adopted holistic approaches to understanding students and their learning. For a selection of approaches see, Marton, F, Hounsell, D and Entwistle, N (1984) 7he *Experience of learning,* Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press. For work which is particularly related to theory and research in open and distance education see, Grace, M (1990) 'Hermeneutic theory in research in distance education', in Evans, T D (ed.) *Research in Distance Education 1,* Geelong: Deakin University, pp. 21-35; Morgan, A R (1992) 'Theorising adult change and development through research in distance education', in Evans, T D and Juler, P E (eds) *Research in Distance Education 2,* Geelong: Deakin University Press, pp. 81-8, see especially pp. 83-4; Morgan, A R, Taylor E and Gibbs, G (1982) 'Understanding the distance learner as a whole person', in Daniel, j *et al. (eds) Learning at a Distance: A world perspective,* Edmonton: Athabasca University/International Council for Distance Education, pp. 83-113.

6   Daryl Nation is an interesting practitioner in this regard. He uses personal reflections as a teaching strategy, not only to teach the conceptual material of the course, but also to engender a personal engagement by students and himself with the course. See, Nation, D E (1987) 'Some reflections upon teaching sociology at a distance', *Distance Edu4cation, 8,* 2, 190-207; 'Teaching texts and independent learning', in Evans, T D and King, B (eds) *Beyond the Text: Contemporary writing on distance education,* Geelong: Deakin University Press, pp. 101-129.

7   The case for critical reflection in distance education has been argued elsewhere. See, Evans, T D and Nation, D E (eds) (1989) *Critical Reflections on Distance Education,* London: Falmer Press, Chapters 2 and 12; several examples can be found in that book *Education,* London: Kogan Page; Evans, T D (1991) 'An epistemological orientation to critical reflection in distance education, in Evans, T D and King, B (eds) *Beyond the Text: Contemporary writing on distance education,* Geelong: Deakin University Press, pp. 7-18.

8   Alistair Morgan has railed against 'mindless data collection' by educational institutions boxes. He has argued that there is a strong case for reforming such applied research and grounding it in theory, and also using this to understand adult change and development. See, Morgan, A P, (1990) 'Whatever happened to the silent scientific revolution? Research, theory and practice in distance education', in Evans, T D (ed.) *Research in Distance Education 1,* Geelong: Deakin University Press, pp. 9-20; Morgan, A R (1992) 'Theorising adult change and development through research in distance education', in Evans, T D and Juler, P A (eds) *Research in Distance Education 2,* Geelong: Deakin University Press, pp. 81-8.

 9   Nick Farnes has charted the life and educational changes of continuing education students and shown how these changes can be related to each other, both graphically and conceptually. See, Farnes, N (1992) 'Life course analysis in distance education, in Evans, T D and Juler, P A (eds) *Research in Distance Education 2,* Geelong: Deakin University Press, pp. 89-104. He points to the need for both more research and theorizing in this area of adult change and development. In terms of the argument in this chapter, it can be seen that the scope for such research is broad and can be embedded in the planning and development phases of open and distance education courses as well as in the form of longitudinal research throughout students' courses.

10   Gleick has told the story of Chaos Theory, including one of its most influential metaphors, the 'butterfly effect', whereby it is argued that the dynamic complexity of weather systems is such that the movement of a butterfly's wings may produce effects on the system which lead eventually to a storm

elsewhere; Gleick, j (1 *987) Chaos: 7he making of a new science,* London: Sphere Books. So, by using the weather system as a metaphor for the education of adults, it may need to be recognized that one student 'stretching their wings' may lead eventually to an 'educational storm'! Chris Bigum has applied some of the ideas of Chaos Theory to distance education; Bigum, C (1990) 'Chaos and educational computing: deconstructing distance education', in Evans, T D (ed.) *Research in Distance Education 1,* Geelong: Deakin University Press, pp. 72-82.

11   This raises not just theoretical and research problems for distance education, but also problems for distance education processes and practices themselves. The research problems are ones concerned with the 'absences' in our work: absences of omission in the sense that, say, Minnis and Morgan outline, and absences of knowing uncovered or suggested by research itself; Minnis, j R (1985)''Ethnography, case study, grounded theory and distance education research', *Distance Education,* 6, 2, 189-98; Morgan, A R (1984) 'A report on qualitative methodologies in research in distance education', *Distance Education, 5,* 2, 252-67; Morgan, A R (1990) 'Whatever happened to the silent revolution? Research, theory and practice in distance education', in Evans, T D (ed.) *Research in Distance Education 1,* Geelong.- Deakin University Press, pp. 9-20.

The problems of open and distance education processes and practices are created by the uncertainties that we now face about the knowns, the givens, the taken-for-granteds in our work. If it can be seen that there are considerable voids in educators' understandings of the people they plan to teach, then what does this say about the educational planning and development undertaken on the students' beha1f? Cziko has argued, using postmodernist science, that educational research - of the positivist empiricist kind - is fatally flawed and cannot predict or control the educational outcomes that it purports to do; Cziko, G A (1989) 'Unpredictability and indeterminism in human behaviour: arguments and imphcations for educational research', *Educational Researcher,* April, 17-25. Such arguments shatter the foundations of instructional design - except, perhaps, in the most tightly controlled and narrow training settings. But the broader implications of the argument are that qualitative research leads towards not only a better understanding of students - as Cziko argues - but also to an appreciation of the voids in our knowledge of those students.

Margaret Grace has discussed some related problems stemming from her work with

hermeneutic theory; see Grace, M (1 990) 'Hermeneutic theory in research in distance education, in Evans, T D (ed.) *Research in Distance Education 1,* Geelong-. Deakin University Press, pp. 21-35; Grace, M (1992) 'Communication and meaning: the first year experience of off-campus study, PhD thesis, Geelong: Deakin University. Patti Lather's work on postmodernist feminist research and theorizing is very stimulating and provides an entree which critical open and distance educators will find fruitful; see, Lather, P (1991) *Getting Smart: Feminist research and pedagogy within the postmodern,* London: Routledge.