Distance education students' experiences of informal study groups in higher education

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Abstract

Although informal learning is an important way of modern adult learning, the experiences of distance students in informal study groups have remained unexplored. The theoretical framework that best informed the study is the informal learning theory. The purpose of the study was to investigate distance education students' experiences of informal study groups. The study had four key objectives, namely to: identify interaction patterns of adult education distance students' informal study groups, establish adult education distance students' experiences of informal study groups, determine practices in adult education distance students' informal study groups, and explore challenges faced by adult education distance students in informal study groups. A qualitative research paradigm was used, in particular a descriptive survey using an explanatory sequential mixed methods research design. Twenty-five participants were drawn from a class of 93 fourth year adult education students at the University of Zambia. Data was collected using a questionnaire. The study participants were asked about how they interacted within study groups chiefly in terms of age, gender and number. They were also asked to describe the activities and experiences they had in their respective informal study groups. Data collected was coded manually and analysed thematically and descriptively. The simple figures and statistics in this study are justified by the researchers who followed a sequential mixed methods approach. The extent to which gender was a factor in interaction patterns in informal study groups was not clearly established due to variations in the sample representation. However, the findings established that there was no significant variation in the manner informal study group were organised. The study revealed many benefits that accrued to students' participation in informal study groups such as improved academic performance. The findings are in tandem with the informal learning theory which recognises the fact that learning among adults can be collaborative. Despite the many benefits, a number of challenges were identified such as the lack of suitable and sufficient study materials. It is, therefore, recommended that the integral link between informal learning and formal learning should be emphasised through professional development of lecturers so that in turn they can encourage students to form informal study groups. Further, lecturers should support students by providing them with links to various online resources so as to enhance learning in informal study groups.

Keywords: *Informal learning, informal study group, interaction pattern and experiences*

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Introduction

Informal groups are worth studying due to their relevance as sub-societies in which human beings interact for a common purpose (McReynolds, 2014). Informal study groups in particular

those existing among university distance education students are an important component of adult learning. According to Sandoval-Lucero et al (2012), studies on college students have determined that over half of the students report participating in study groups, which they voluntarily form (Li et al., 2010). This is because such groups play an important role in the learning and experiences of distance students. For this reason, examining informal study groups could help us understand how distance education students of the University of Zambia form and learn in groups.

The study of informal learning has a long history in adult education (Knowles, 1950; Smith, 2002). It is an important way of modern adult learning. Adult education recognises that much of adults' informal learning is incidental rather than intentional (Lai & Smith, 2018b). In addition, it has also been confirmed that a significant amount of learning occurs outside of formal education settings (Smith & Smith, 2008). Despite this recognition, research on adult learning has been bedevilled by a lack of consensus regarding the meaning of the term, informal learning (Smith, 1999). Some adult learning theorists and researchers consider informal learning as that which takes place in the workplace, but which is not part of a programme of training or instruction (Rogoff, et al., 2016). According to Lai and Smith (2018b) such learning may or may not be incidental. This article dwells on informal study groups, a topic that emanates from and heavily lends to informal learning.

Informal learning is generally considered to be self-directed, although "self-directed" learning has sometimes been characterised as independent learning that is facilitated by a teacher or resource person (Smith & Smith, 2008; Lai & Smith, 2018). Others think of the non-systematic knowledge acquisition that occurs through simple exposure to various information sources (i.e. books, television, other people) in everyday life. Smith and Smith (2008, n.p) explain that informal learning activities may include, but not limited to:

> *personal pursuits such as reading books or magazine articles, viewing do-it-yourself instructional videos, attending and participating in book clubs, health-related groups and organisations, cultural events… or conferences and conventions, … to learn about something of personal interest or to develop skill for personal use....*

In recent times, the definition of informal learning has expanded to include a group meaning-making process (Ziegler et al., 2014). Similarly, the community of practice model as propounded by Lave and Wenger (1991) positions informal group as learning through joint enterprises, mutual engagement, and shared repertoire of resources in the community. Generally speaking, rural communities compared with urban communities may not have the needed resources that students may rely on for their studies. This is because most rural areas hardly have library facilities or educational resources including reliable internet connectivity. For this reason, informal study groups operating as groups of community of practice may be a valuable source for learning.

Community of practice has gained momentum as a conceptual framework for understanding informal learning as a group process. Past studies have typically oriented informal learning as an individual, reflective process that can best be understood through the learner's retrospective accounts about their experiences. Thus, the researchers' considered view was that probing adult education informal study groups would enhance our understanding of their interaction patterns, experiences and practices. This might help us come up with measures that could aid or enhance organisation of informal study groups and subsequent improvement in distance students' performance.

The article relies upon Livingstone's (2001) definition of informal learning. Livingstone (2001:4) defined informal learning "as activities involving the pursuit of understanding,

knowledge or skill which occurs without the presence of externally imposed curricular criteria". It is learning without the assistance of teachers, mentors or coaches. It is widely believed that informal study groups or what is commonly referred to as student-to-student interaction is vital in distance learning (Moore et al, 2016:1). In the article, informal learning is clearly exemplified by students (or learners) studying by distance at the University of Zambia. The students meet their lecturers face-to-face at the beginning of each academic year for residential school for two weeks only. This means that for the rest of the year, students have to study alone or meet with others doing the same course to share their understanding of the course materials.

The researchers were motivated to conduct this study by the fact that whether a formal, informal or non-formal way of learning is used, one is sure of getting a result. This has been affirmed by Bertucci et. al (2010), Kamp et. al (2012) who state that there is an increase in academic achievement whether learning is informal or formal. This is because learning takes place everywhere and for a purpose. For example, learning may simply be for pleasure, finding a solution to a problem or a pastime activity. Although there are many ways of learning, probably what matters is the efficiency and value attached to any of them.

Currently, the University of Zambia has to cope with an increasing student population in the midst of limited learning and study spaces. This means that certain activities such as tutorials commonly associated with formal learning cannot effectively be executed. In addition, this study makes an attempt to respond positively to Merriam et. al (2009) lamentation that informal learning in adult education is not studied in detail. Merriam et. al (2009) add that informal learning in adult education is not well researched while Bennet (2012) underscores the fact that often, the distinguishing feature of informal learning in the literature is the context or location of learning, rather than the learning process itself. This is one of the aspects that the current study examines. The researchers decided to probe informal learning among distance students' informal study groups in order to gain an understanding of their experiences of informal study groups.

The purpose of the study was to investigate the interaction patterns, experiences and practices of University of Zambia distance adult education students' informal study groups.

Objectives

The study had four key objectives, namely to:
1. Identify interaction patterns of adult education distance students' informal study groups,
2. establish adult education distance students' experiences of informal study groups,
3. determine practices in adult education distance students' informal study groups, and
4. explore challenges faced by adult education distance students' informal study groups.

Considering that informal learning in adult education is not studied in detail (Merriam et. al., 2009), we believe that the research findings will remain relevant and that they will be of interest to other researchers and academic staff. The current thinking, which the current researchers disagree with, is that knowledge can only be gained from a classroom. It is assumed that it is only a lecturer in class who has the knowledge that can be learnt by students. In this regard, the latter is expected to learn what is presumed to be real knowledge only from a lecturer. The lecturer is in this way considered to be a 'prescribed textbook' among learners. Considering that there are other ways by which people can learn outside of the conventional classroom, this study triggers interest among academicians, researchers and learners to come up with ways that can enhance learning in informal study group set ups.

Theoretical framework

Although the concept of informal learning has theoretical roots from Lewin (1935) and Dewey (1938), who emphasized individual experience and interactions between learners and their environment (Conlon, 2004), informal learning was introduced by Knowles (1950). He divided learning into four types based on the perspective of locus: of control unintended, self-directed, mediated, and authority directed. Knowles et. al (2005) explain that informal learning mainly appears in the first three types: unintended, self-directed, and mediated learning. Distance education students at the University of Zambia are likely to be involved in unintended, self-directed, mediated learning considering the circumstances in which they find themselves. Although informal learning is considered unintended, it has the presence of the mind of the learner. Lai and Smith (2018b) estimate that people spend almost three-quarters of their learning time in informal settings while Latchem (2014) estimates that 70-90 per cent of human learning is informal learning. Informal learning is an appropriate form of learning to adults because an adult learner as is the case with distance education students at the University of Zambia has a clear motive for learning.

Informal learning theory has proven useful in understanding adult learning as adults engage in most of their learning outside of formal educational contexts (Ziegler et. al., 2014). Several studies have shown that people gain and transfer knowledge more effectively and frequently in informal learning situations than in traditional formal training (Ellinger, 2005). In the absence of a study into this claim, however, benefits that may accrue as a result of participating in an informal study group may not be known in the case of distance education students at the University of Zambia. As stated earlier, distance students at the University of Zambia come for residential school for only two weeks in a given academic year. This is the time that the students meet face-to-face with their lecturers in a classroom. Given the limited time of formal learning, distance students are more likely to be engaged in informal learning.

Research has been highlighting the fact that informal learning mainly occurs outside formal contexts. It has also been observed that most studies view informal learning as an individual process. It is an individual process in that it is the individual student that feels the need to cooperate and study with other students. According to Laurillard (2009:12), informal learning is viewed as learning that has "no teacher, no defined curriculum topic or concept, and no external assessment". It is also considered to be self-directed, controlled by a social group, done in one's free time outside of a formal setting (Boustedt et. al, 2011; Lai et. al, 2013; Lai & Smith, 2018b). For example, a student having challenges in understanding certain concepts or course material may decide to engage others through group work in order to gain a better understanding of such concepts or course material. What facilitates the formation of informal study groups is the need to learn from each other.

Boileau (2017) is of the view that learners are pulled into the informal learning experience based on a problem, or a knowledge and skills gap, chosen by the learner, who then engages in learning activities aimed at closing the knowledge gap or otherwise mitigating the performance challenge or problem. He goes on to say that informal learning is based on meaningful experiences that are built on top of earlier experiences and pre-existing knowledge frameworks, allowing new tacit and explicit information to emerge more easily. For example, a student may meet other students to discuss assignments given to them in a course or courses. Students living in close proximity and doing same courses are likely to form informal study groups in order to facilitate their learning. Sometimes students may meet simply to share their experiences about their studies. Probably to that extent, the kind of interaction patterns that form in these groups may vary as much as the experiences of the students. When students meet, they are likely to develop certain practices which later become part of the study strategies.

Literature review

Informal learning is self-directed learning within informal groups without the assistance of teachers, mentors or coaches while formal learning is framed as teacher-driven and occurring in a formal education setting (Lai et al., 2013; Lai & Smith, 2018b). It refers to the 'experiences of everyday living from which we learn something' (Merriam et al., 2009; Werquin, 2016; Van Noy, James & Bedley, 2016). Livingstone (2001), Marsick et al (2006) and Laurillard (2009) add that informal learning is any activity involving the pursuit of understanding knowledge or skill which occurs in the absence of externally imposed curricular criteria. Lave and Wenger's (1991) work extends the concept of learning to include what occurs as individuals with a common interest talk to one another. In this study, informal learning refers to the learning that takes place among adult education distance students who meet as a group to discuss course related issues such as assignments and areas of difficulty that they come across in the study modules. Since students informally form groups for the purpose of learning, we can describe their action as one that leads to group learning in informal study groups.

A number of benefits resulting from group learning have been documented and widely researched in the pedagogic literature (e.g. Gillies & Ashman, 2003; Keren et al., 2017). Their findings corroborate that when people learn in a group, exchange of ideas is enhanced, motivation increases, critical thinking is enhanced, while socialisation is fostered and attitude towards learning improves (Ellinger, 2005; Hassanien, 2006; Morrison & McCutheon, 2019; Bagdonaite-Stelmokiene & Zydziunaite, 2020). Group learning in higher education yields many benefits to the participants.

The utilisation of study groups has also been observed to be an important learning habit for distance education learners (Bhebhe & Maphosa, 2020). Bukaliya and Mubika (2015) discovered that ODL learners in Zimbabwe preferred to study in groups rather than alone in a study of study strategies. The advantages of studying in groups were numerous, ranging from alleviating the loneliness that comes with distance learning to creating forums for peers to meet and discuss ideas. Wasley (2006), referenced in Bukaliya and Mubika (2015), found that students who participated in group learning received superior grades because they were given opportunities for active and reflective learning.

Other benefits arising from participating in informal study groups have been highlighted and categorised as managerial, behavioural and social objectives. They include the development of critical thinking and a number of generic skills such as organisation; negotiation, team work and time management; social interaction opportunity for students, and means of exchanging knowledge and using the expertise of one another. Others are opportunities for students to give greater depth and breadth to their projects; sharing responsibility to reduce assessment fear, and moral support and motivation (McGraw & Tidwell, 2001; Ellinger, 2005).

While researching on cooperative learning in science classroom, Johnson and Johnson (2013) established that students studying in groups achieved higher levels of thought and that an individual in such groups retained knowledge longer than individual learners. In spite of the benefits that can be derived from students' involvement in informal study groups, researchers of this study hardly found any research study on informal study groups in particular distance education students of the University of Zambia. Additionally, it has been generally acknowledged that most previous research on group learning in higher education has been limited (Lerner, 1995; McGraw & Tidwell, 2001).Though studying in groups is considered to be advantageous due to the benefits that accrue to the participants, Hendry et al (2005) have identified some disadvantages. The extra amount of time that is spent on organising such meetings is one of the disadvantages. Another disadvantage is that a lot of time is wasted on socialising by the group members.

Related to informal learning and in particular this study is the concept of informal study groups. Informal study groups (ISG) are groups that have been formed by students themselves outside the formal education settings in order to enhance their academic learning abilities. In respect of higher education institutions, this means that students learn through participating in informal study groups in order to enhance personal competencies (Barth et al., 2007). Informal study groups interact in a number of ways or patterns. Interaction patterns are ways used by students to interact and learn with and from each other. Moore (1993) identified three different learning interactions that take place in distance education. One is learner content in which the learner and the subject of study interact. The second is one in which interaction takes place between the learner and one who may be described as an "expert". The third interaction is where students interact with one another, which is the focus of this study. In recent time, another interaction pattern has been identified and is known as Learner-interface (Kuna, 2012:2).

According to Kuna (2012:2) student interactions play an important role in the learning process. Where purposeful interaction is employed, it increases learners' knowledge (Ritchie & Hoffman, 1997; Li et al., 2010). In a study conducted by Li et al (2010), the findings revealed that students who participated in informal study groups felt that their learning and commitment were enhanced while they learnt new learning strategies. In the context of this study, the type of interaction being referred to is the third one where a group of students may come together and interact with each other based on such factors as friendship, age, proximity and doing same courses.

In a study conducted by Livingstone (1999) to understand the extent and distribution of self-reported learning activities in the Canadian adult population, it was reported that more than 95% of those interviewed from a sample of 1,562 were involved in some form of explicit informal learning activities that they considered important. The study also established that on average participants spent approximately 4 hours per week on informal learning. The participants used informal learning in such areas as computer skills related to employment and communication skills to mention a few. The study recommended that those designing Canada's educational policies among others should give clear consideration to mostly adults' informal learning practices. Although the study in Canada did not specifically select students from an educational institution but simply the general adult population of various backgrounds, the findings are still critical to this study as they try to underline the significance of informal learning on which this study is focusing.

Methodology

In this study, a qualitative research paradigm was used in particular a descriptive survey using an explanatory sequential mixed methods research design. A mixed methods approach provides for a "more comprehensive view of group purpose, formation and function" (McReynolds, 2014:11). This is supported by Hendriske (2013) who posits that the most common methods of empirical research design are the quantitative and qualitative methods. A mixed methods research questions are concerned with unknown aspects of a phenomenon which are addressed with information that is presented in both numerical and narrative forms (Bryman, 2012; Ritchie & Lewis, 2013; Teddlie & Tashakkari, 2014). Thus, the first section of the questionnaire contained quantitative data-gathering questions, while the second section contained qualitative data-gathering questions. The main reason for using mixed methods is that combining qualitative and quantitative methods can provide a better understanding of research issues than a single method (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2012). In this regard, the quantitative and qualitative data, as well as their analysis, helped the researchers to clarify and explain information presented in both numerical and narrative forms by delving deeper into the

perspectives of participants (Subedi, 2016). In addition, the inclusion of qualitative questions was ideal considering that informal learning is considered to be an individual, reflective process, and as such understanding the learner's retrospective accounts about their experiences was cardinal. The incorporation of quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis effectively facilitated triangulation as well.

All the 93 registered 4th year adult education distance students at the University of Zambia were eligible to participate in the study. Of this number, only 25 (just about a quarter) of them responded to the questionnaire and subsequently made up the sample. The study used what is commonly referred to as 'opportunity sampling' whereby those students who were willing to participate in the study formed the sample (McLeod, 2019). Although this is a quick and easy way of choosing participants, it is possible that a representative sample may not have been achieved. For this reason, the findings of this study may not be generally applied to all distance adult education students at the University of Zambia as well as other institutions. Notwithstanding the foregoing, a sample is a set of target respondents selected from a larger population for the purpose of a survey, which adequately addressed the aim of this study. In this regard, the target population was met.

A questionnaire, which comprised both open and closed ended questions, was used to collect data. Quantitative data which arose mainly from closed ended questions helped in determining the frequency or commonality of responses. The questionnaire was emailed to all 4th year distance adult education students after they had returned to their homes following the expiry of the residential school. The students' email and postal addresses were earlier solicited for during the residential school. As a follow-up to students who did not respond to the email, a questionnaire enclosed in a return envelope was sent to students using the Zambia Postal Services (ZAMPOST). The process of data collection lasted slightly over a projected period of five months due to the delay in getting feedback from the respondents.

Data collected was coded manually and analysed thematically and descriptively. The simple figures and statistics in this study are justified by the researchers who followed an explanatory sequential mixed methods research design. As suggested by David and Sutton (2011:473) "the starting point in the process of analyzing categorical variables, nominal or ordinal, is to produce a frequency count of the number of cases that responded to each of the variable categories".

With regard to ethical issues, students were informed about the impending study during the residential school and that when they returned home, a questionnaire would be sent to them. Thereafter, students who were willing to participate in the study were asked to provide their email and postal addresses. Fortunately, all the students responded positively by indicating their addresses. Once the questionnaires had been dispatched, none of the participants was coerced to complete and return it in any way. In addition, the questionnaire included information that assured participants of maximum confidentiality about their participation and identity before, during and after the study bearing in mind that the study was for academic purposes. Failure by a participant to return the questionnaire was interpreted as unwillingness to participate in the study over which the researchers had not ethical right to pursue the matter further. The data collected were confidentially used and kept (Roth & Von Unger, 2018). Since all the researchers worked for academic institutions, they as humanly as was possible adhered to the ethical principles of research.

Findings and Discussion

The presentation and discussion of findings are divided into two sections. The first section describes the characteristics of the participants and administration of data collection instrument while the second section addresses the main question of the study. Furthermore, the main

question of the study is subdivided into key thematic areas emerging from the findings and is discussed simultaneously.

Characteristics of participants

The study comprised 6 male and 19 female students. The youngest participant was 30 while the oldest was 51 years old. All the participants were fourth year distance students in the adult education programme. All the participants were working for various organisations except for one who was self-employed. Of the 25 participants, 10 were teachers while 4 were engaged in clerical work. The rest of the participants (11) working for different organisations were simply categorised as "others" due to the high degree of diversity in the types of job. Only two participants were sponsored while the rest were self-sponsored. The high number of self-sponsored adult education distance students is in line with one of Knowles' (1950) principles that adults' readiness to learn is largely influenced by the benefits that will result from learning something. In relation to this study, students understood what they wanted to learn and so were ready to pay for their education and enhance their learning by joining informal study groups. One other interesting finding was that all the study participants but one belonged to an informal study group.

Experiences from the administration of the data collection instrument

There are two succinct experiences the researchers share arising from the study specifically in relation to the administration of the data collection instrument highlighted because of their bearing on the findings. First, using e-mail as a channel for the distribution of questionnaire to students did not work as anticipated as only eight responded. Second, even the eight students who responded took very long to do so. This forced the researchers to dispatch questionnaires using ZAMPOST to students who did not initially respond. To facilitate the process, a self-addressed envelope with a return postage stamp was sent to them individually.

The second strategy, though slow, yielded a better result as 17 questionnaires were duly completed and returned. It was also observed that the majority of the participants (10 of 17) from within Lusaka City returned the completed questionnaire to the researchers in person. The reason for this kind of action was not clear considering the fact that a self-addressed envelope with a postage stamp was sent together with a questionnaire.

Reasons for forming informal study groups

Regarding the question which probed participants' justification or reasons for forming informal study groups, findings revealed that there were three main reasons why students formed informal study groups. The first reason was that during the residential school, students had few contact hours with lecturers. Students felt that by forming such study groups, they would make up for the 'lost hours' with lecturers by meeting with each other instead of idling about. The second reason revealed was that for the period of two weeks that distance students attend residential school, each full course is given 10 hours of lecture while a half course has 5 hours; time they considered to be too short. The third reason students gave for forming study groups was that they wanted to help each other in their studies. Based on the views expressed by the participants, it can be argued that the formation of informal study groups appears to be a direct response to the inadequate time allocated to the residential school. The general view was that meeting in groups would help them understand sections of the modules which they found difficult to follow. On the suitability of study materials provided by the institution, one of the participants expressed inability to understand some topics in modules as follows:

> *... we meet in a group to try and work out, and understand some topics in the module which as individuals we fail to understand especially sections that appear to have been extracted from other sources* (ISG 11).

A similar view was expressed as follows:

> *Some modules appear to be small, but the material in them is difficult to follow. So that is why when we meet, we discuss what is in the module and attempt the tasks given. But sometimes we fail to understand some topics and simply skip them ...*(ISG 17).

Another participant echoed other participants' sentiments for joining an informal study group as follows:

> *I joined an informal study group because I failed to understand some course materials* (ISG 15).

The fact that students would be helped through informal study group is in line with Lave and Wenger (1991) argument that when an individual belongs to an informal study group, they learn through joint enterprises, mutual engagement, and shared repertoire of resources in the community. For example, students mutually agreed on what topic they should focus on in a given meeting. And those who had extra study materials freely shared them in the group. In a study conducted by Ellinger (2005), it was established that people gain and transfer knowledge more effectively and frequently in informal learning situations than in traditional formal training. In this study, some participants strongly indicated that meeting in groups enhanced their knowledge on some topics.

Below are findings and discussions segmented in key thematic areas covering the main study questions of the study.

a. *Interaction patterns of adult education distance students in informal study groups*

One of the research questions of the study was aimed at establishing interaction patterns that students formed in informal study groups. The variables that were examined to establish the interactions were frequency of meetings, gender distribution in the groups, and age of the participants. Others were meeting place(s) for the study groups, time of meeting, compelling reasons for their meetings and finally the number of students constituting an informal study group.

One of the major findings about the interaction patterns in informal study groups was that the informal study groups did not have a permanent venue for their meetings. For example, most of informal study groups (18 out of 25) used local schools for their meetings while two of them indicated that they had personal study rooms. While one participant indicated using a friend's place for informal study group's meetings, the other one was not specific about it but stated that as long as the place was quiet with less distraction, they chose to use it. The fact that participants met in different places for their studies is in agreement with the informal learning theory which observes that most of the adult learning is conducted outside of formal educational contexts (Ziegler et al., 2014)

As far as the frequency of meetings was concerned, there were two participants (ISG 4 & ISG 10) who indicated that they held study meetings three times a week, while five students indicated that they were only able to meet twice in a week. Seven candidates met three times in a week for their study meetings while ten of them met even more than three times in a week. While 9 students found evening time as a prime time for their study meetings, 13 of them chose weekend as the most convenient time though the exact time was not given at all. The remaining

participants indicated a variety of times when they met for their study and that this was determined by convenience. According to Bertram (2003) the type of learning that takes place in group meetings depends very much on how frequent they meet. According to the informal learning theory, participants are in control of their learning as argued by Boustedt et al (2011), Lai et al (2013), and Lai and Smith (2018b).

Findings revealed that there was no clear pattern of interaction based on gender due to large variations in representation in the study groups. But to some extent, age appeared to be a factor in terms of interactions in that most groups had students of a similar age. For example, most of the young students would meet together while the older ones would find a group of people of similar age group where possible.

As for the number of students in a study group, findings were that the majority of the groups comprised more than 3 students. This is summarised in Table 1.0 as follows:

Table 1.0: Number of Students in informal study groups

	Number of groups	Number of participants in each group
1.	9	5
2.	6	5
3.	5	4
4.	2	3
5.	2	2

Source: Field data 2019

Finally, findings also revealed that the frequency of students interacting in groups was dictated by a number of reasons. It was noted that there was increased activity in study group, that is, meeting more regularly, whenever students were preparing for examinations (16) and tests (4) and writing assignments (14). Informal study group meetings were more common also when there was a need to research into a particular topic (4) and that this was more pronounced during residential school. One participant summed up occasions when they were likely to meet in groups as follows:

> *We are mostly compelled to meet in groups whenever we are preparing for*
> *tests, writing assignments and examinations* (ISG 13).

b. *Adult education distance students' experiences of informal study groups*

Participants' experiences of informal study groups can be categorised into two. The majority of them (20) found informal study groups very useful while a paltry 4 found them to be useful. Participants were also asked to explain how useful or not useful their experiences of informal study groups were. Some participants (4) explained that they were motivated to study and discuss with fellow students areas of difficulty. Their interactions helped them to understand topics they perceived to be difficult. This view was articulated by one of the participants as follows:

> *....because I am able to get ideas from others and understand the topic*
> *well* (ISG 3).

This finding is in line with other studies (see Gillies & Ashman, 2003) that confirmed benefits arising from group learning. Other participants (5) also revealed that through informal study groups, they were able to get very useful academic information pertaining to their studies. The following is how one participant expressed this view:

> *I am helped on how to answer examination questions and how to go about*
> *assignments questions* (ISG 18).

This finding is in agreement with Barth et al (2007) findings which established that students enhanced personal competencies by participating in informal study groups. As earlier noted, people spend almost three-quarters of their learning time in informal settings (Lai & Smith (2018b) because informal learning is an appropriate form of learning to adults. The frequency of these meetings is in line with the informal learning theory which states that an adult learner has a clear motive for learning. Some participants (3) reported that through informal study groups, their academic performance improved (See Johnson & Johnson, 2013; McGraw & Tidwell, 2001). One participant expressed this view as follows:

> *Informal study group helps me to deepen my understanding of academic work* (ISG 7).

Participants also stated their experiences of informal study groups in terms of the tasks that they engaged in. The most prominent experiences among the participants were related to revising past examination papers (7), writing assignments (6) and sharing knowledge (6). Three participants each also singled out knowledge sharing, discussions based on modules as well as sharing tasks for group discussions. The least experienced task was revising tests for the reason that feedback from the lecturers was rather slow. For this reason, it was not among the priority list of tasks that participants were engaged in.

Based on their experiences of informal study groups, participants indicated that their learning needs were being met. For example, twenty-five participants indicated that they were able to review as many past question papers as possible as they prepared for the final examinations. An equally important need that participants (23) met by participating in informal study groups was that they were able to discuss the requirements of assignment questions given to them. Other participants (19) expressed the fact that during the residential school it was difficult to write proper lecture notes as lecturers 'appeared' to be in a hurry to teach and complete as many topics as they could. In light of this, many participants found it appropriate to use informal study group meetings to copy notes from friends who claimed to have managed to write down the notes during the residential school lectures. Other participants (10) also claimed that they had missed some lectures and as such they wanted to copy from friends who had attended such lectures. Finally, participants (10) also made use of the time during informal study groups to share books and study materials.

c. *Practices of adult education distance students in informal study groups*

The study also investigated practices in distance students' informal study groups. The practices strictly speaking referred to how study groups were conducted. Findings were generally similar across all the groups. However, the salient and common ones are presented below.

Findings revealed that the informal study group meetings involved a three-stage process. The first stage involved choosing a topic or questions at the end of the meeting for the next discussion. This was aimed at giving group participants chance to prepare adequately for the next discussion. The second stage involved convening a meeting at which anyone who felt they understood the topic or questions better was allowed to lead the discussion. The third stage involved typing, printing and sharing of notes based on the discussion. One participant reported that:

> *Before dispersing, we agree on a topic or questions for discussion in the next meeting. When we meet, if there is one who understands better, he or she leads and explains to the group. Of course, there will be additions and subtractions by other members* (ISG 22).

It can, therefore, be concluded that in terms of practice, the organisation of informal study groups had little variation in that almost all of them had routine activities and similar processes. This was confirmed by the activities that participants listed in response to a sub-question that sought to establish how informal study groups organised their meetings.

Furthermore, findings revealed that as soon as an informal group met, one student volunteered to lead others but in some cases the group members would select one to lead or chair the proceedings of the meeting. Findings also revealed that during the meeting, the study group mainly focused on the contents of the module, past examinations papers as well as tests that they had written during residential school. While the meeting was going on, individuals would write down answers discussed based on the past examination questions for further study. As the meeting approached the end, the group would agree on the topic or topics for the next meeting. The manner by which informal groups were organised is in line with Lai and Smith (2018b) and Laurillard's (2009) confirmation that informal learning is self-directed and that it occurs in the absence of an externally imposed curricular criterion. This is because participants decided on what would be discussed, when, where and how the meeting would be conducted.

d. Challenges faced by adult education distance students in informal study groups

One of the research questions in this study was aimed at determining challenges that distance students' informal study groups faced. Findings revealed several challenges. One of the challenges experienced by the majority of the groups was absenteeism at study meetings. It was reported that absenteeism was more common during working hours because some of the students who were working would not always be granted permission for study. One participant complained that:

> *Some group members do not manage time well. It is either they are absent or they spend a lot of time on one topic* (ISG 15).

Another challenge was that students lacked suitable and sufficient study materials for their study meetings. Paradoxically, a few students reported that some students had access to useful study materials but that they were in the habit of hiding them from their fellow students. These observations were expressed as follows:

> *I think that we are not provided with sufficient study materials. To make matters worse some study batches (modules) are of very poor quality* (ISG 17).

> *Some (students) hide very good data which can help the group* (ISG 15).

Added to this challenge was the fact that whenever students failed to understand certain parts or units in a given module availed to them by their lecturers, they rarely sought clarification from the concerned lecturers as they claimed it was difficult to have contact with them. This viewpoint is supported by the following excerpt:

> *At times, lecturers don't respond or give clarification when contacted via email* (ISG 16).

Additionally, most of the students expressed worry about topics in which they had limited understanding whenever they sat for final examinations. Here is how one participant articulated this view:

> *There are times that none of us understands certain topics and such topics are left hanging* (ISG 22).

Lack of suitable study venues was yet another challenge. The majority of the study participants bemoaned poor time management for a study group meeting. The study established that the time for starting their study meetings was poorly managed. Poor time management was attributed to late release of participants for their private study by their employers. In addition, as reported by ISG 15, some members spent a substantial amount time on one topic. The reported poor time management has also been confirmed by Hendry et al (2005) who reported that more time is wasted on socialising by group members.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study aimed at establishing university distance education students' experiences of informal study groups. From the perspectives of the participants, informal study groups provided a valuable platform for learning. They observed that informal study groups contributed greatly to their academic success. This finding is in conformity with other pedagogic literature, which has acknowledged that people gain and transfer knowledge more effectively in informal learning situations. As supported by literature reviewed, the study revealed that students were ready to finance their studies partly due to the perceived benefits that would accrue from learning. Additionally, the results of the study demonstrated the collaborative nature of informal study groups in the manner they were organised and roles shared. This corroborates with the informal learning theory which this study buys into and which recognises the fact that learning among adults is collaborative. The findings revealed that adult students recognized the need for teamwork as seen in their desire to participate in informal study groups. The collaboration existing in informal study groups confirms previous research regarding the collaborative nature and academic benefits that can be derived from informal study groups. In spite of the benefits arising from participating in informal study groups, participants experienced a number of challenges, which included lack of suitable and sufficient study materials.

This study shall create more awareness among academicians and policy makers that learning in informal study groups is an important component in education. Key players such as academics and students may be helped to understand and appreciate that knowledge is not only acquired from a considered authority, in this case a lecturer teaching students face-to-face in a classroom or a lecturer creating groups of students to accomplish class tasks. Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended that lecturers should be helping students by providing them with links to various online resources to enhance their learning in informal study groups. Additionally, the integral link between informal learning and formal learning should be emphasised through professional development of lecturers so that they can encourage students to engage in informal learning. This may not only inspire students to participate actively in informal study groups to improve their academic performance but may also minimise challenges students face in their studies.

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