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Taking the plunge, juggling acts, and friendly fire: Metaphors that distance learning students use to describe their experiences of online learning

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Abstract

Students embarking on higher education confront many challenges. Particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic, universities have become increasingly concerned to address these challenges and to develop comprehensive strategies to nurture student wellbeing. Distance learning courses create additional pressures for universities, however, and not only because online students tend to be older than typical undergraduate student cohorts and therefore can present with an array of social and caring responsibilities at the point of enrolment. The present study's objectives were to explore how distance learning students describe their experiences of online learning, with a particular focus on their engagement with their course, their lifestyle and wellbeing challenges, and their interactions with staff and fellow students. Developing Shinebourne and Smith's (2010) innovative phenomenology, coupled with experiential metaphor methodology, we employed a two-stage data collection process based on participant diaries and follow-up interviews. In Stage 1, diaries captured student experiences in real time. Diary entry data subsequently informed the schedules of the semi-structured interviews that followed in Stage 2. Metaphorical analysis provided insight into online students' lifeworlds, in terms of the practical challenges of balancing roles with time pressures, the existential struggle of forging a new identity, and the search for meaningful interpersonal connections. We unearthed six inter-related metaphors: 'Plunging into the Deep'; 'Impostor Syndrome'; 'A Precariously Balanced Juggling Act'; 'The Gift of Time'; 'Hostile Territories and Friendly Fire'; and 'House of Cards'. Confirming and extending previous work, our findings demonstrate that online distance learning is a journey of self-doubt and discovery interrupted by both traumatic and transformative moments as students strive to succeed against multiple existential threats. We recommend that universities devote resources to facilitating an understanding of online students' unique circumstances to provide them with informed and effective wellbeing support at the start of and throughout their learning journeys.

Keywords: online learning, distance learning, phenomenological analysis, metaphor, student journey

Introduction

Going to university can be a major life-transforming event, loaded with potentially significant financial and lifestyle hazards (Cage et al., 2021) that can generate significant wellbeing challenges (Ribeiro et al., 2018). Time pressure anxieties, financial hardship, and stress related disorders are more widespread among students in higher education (HE) compared to the general population (Adlaf et al., 2001). As only approximately a third of universities had implemented specific wellbeing policies by 2017, understanding

how funding and support can be best directed and utilised is clearly a key imperative (Thorley, 2017). Thorley (2017) recommended increasing funding to create a sector-wide approach towards student wellbeing, encouraging HE institutions to develop 'whole university' wellbeing targeting strategies.

University students' wellbeing has been further highlighted in recent years, following the Covid-19 pandemic (Office for National Statistics, 2020). Evidence suggests mental health struggles affect academic attainment, increasing the probability of course withdrawal and failure (Hughes & Spanner, 2019). Self-harming behaviour is a significant risk, with an estimated 95 students tragically taking their own lives in 2017/2018 (Office for National Statistics, 2018). Supporting student wellbeing is therefore more important than ever. Nurturing student resilience is one way to improve student mental and physical health and welfare (Southwick et al., 2014). Holdsworth et al., (2018) found that peer support networks forged at university can often be more important than family relationships, in terms of providing distractions from multiple pressures and helping to rebuild resilience. Staff support is also clearly a crucial factor in managing student wellbeing. Postgraduate students have acknowledged the encouragement their lecturers provided with respect to the progress of their studies (Holdsworth et al., 2018).

In their taxonomy of the factors affecting distance student wellbeing, Lister et al. (2021) argued that personal experience influenced whether a factor was regarded as a barrier or an enabler; what was a barrier for one student could well have been an enabler for another. The authors conceptualised barriers and enablers as *environmental* (life pressures, university rules and regulations), *study related* (curriculum characteristics and assessment support), or *skills related* (study and self-management skills). Lister et al., (2021) recommended that course providers should adopt a holistic wellbeing approach to support distance learners, for example by improving course design and structure, but also by addressing individual barriers and enablers to learning.

Online courses present HE with additional student welfare and wellbeing challenges. Distance learning students tend to be older than on-campus students. Often having to balance multiple different caring responsibilities, they can regularly experience more challenging circumstances compared to their on-campus counterparts (Waterhouse et al., 2020). While academic study at any age can be complicated (Stoten, 2015), postgraduate students returning to university after a prolonged period of absence experience a greater loss of self-confidence, often doubting their ability to succeed (Ribeiro et al., 2013). Student motivation has been found to be inseparably connected to identity and in particular *identity change* (Swain & Hammond, 2011). Acutely aware of not fitting the traditional student profile for example, online students often conceptualise themselves as imposters whilst struggling to rediscover previously learned habits and behaviours (Aird, 2017). Over twenty years ago, Reay (2002) noted that mature students – particularly those from working class backgrounds – reported feelings of inauthenticity when accessing higher education. On campus and online distance learning students alike can be prone to feelings of 'impostor syndrome': "class is mediated by ethnicity and gender", Reay concluded, "and these mediations are played out in mature students' negotiations of the process" (p.414).

Several scholars have used Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' to theorise how class and mature student status interact to create barriers to higher education (e.g. Leese, 2010; Burnell, 2015). Referring to the learned set of schemata or structures of perception, conception and action that orient a person to the world, the concept of habitus incorporates aesthetic judgements, metaphorical and linguistic preferences, and the embodied use of space and time. Eberle and Hobrecht (2021) noted a significant association between

distance students' experiences and their domestic surroundings. Negative pressures included having to incorporate learning spaces into the home, a nurturing domestic social space. Positive impacts included enjoying unconstrained access to learning materials online and not having to commute. Role conflicts predicted the development of experiential guilt, engendered by multiple responsibilities and limited time pressures, and exacerbated by the absence of explicit university guidelines on how to manage these conflicts (Samra et al., 2021). Some students reported enhanced motivation to succeed however, because their personal circumstances directly supported their studies (Wayne et al., 2007; Samra et al., 2021). Although distance students are empowered by their studies, they struggle to reconcile their social identities and interpersonal commitments with feeling guilty about how they allocate their time (Jones et al., 2021).

One route into understanding the student experience in terms of habitus is through the analysis of metaphor. The generative metaphor of the 'journey' for example has been widely deployed in educational discourse (Hughes & Tight, 2013). The metaphor communicates the idea that going to university involves a time-based quest for knowledge that leaves the traveller in a different identity state from when they started. Enabling the communication of experience, metaphor bridges the gap between that which is well understood and that which remains ambiguous (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, cited in Shinebourne & Smith, 2010). Metaphor is a powerful tool for revealing that which may have been previously inexpressible or unarticulated. In their study of night nurses' experiences, Zannini et al. (2015) discovered that participants used similar metaphors to describe their experiences of the ward at night. Using a novel photo elicitation methodology coupled with metaphorical analysis, Kahu and Picton (2022) studied students' transition from school to university. The students likened their journey to a *rollercoaster*, talked of being unable to keep up with the *fast-moving* curriculum, and depicted themselves as *passive* learners.

Metaphor is therefore an "experiential phenomenon" (Angus & Rennie, 1988 p. 552) that facilitates the expression of what is seen and felt. Conveying multiple layers of corporeal, tangible and visual meanings, metaphor helps communicate painful experiences and thereby grants access to another person's lifeworld (Kirmayer, 1992; Lyddon et al., 2001). Focusing on the metaphors participants use to express their lived experiences expands the listener's understanding of the habitus of the embodied and the experiential (Levitt et al., 2000). In their study of the experience of drug addiction, Shinebourne and Smith (2010) highlighted the importance of focusing on the metaphoric expressions participants used to describe their dependence. Metaphor enabled participants to vividly express their painful experiences and allowed researchers to gain a deeper insight into their lifeworld.

In their investigation of online students' communication experiences, Symeonides and Childs (2015) found that meaningful interaction between students and tutors was critical for effective learning. Written interactions lacking in non-verbal cues and conversational nuance for example, failed to convey personality and affective tone, militating against student participation. Furthermore, fearing potential embarrassment that their online forum posts would lack academic rigour and receive criticism, or – even worse – be ignored, students were reluctant to interact with each other online. However, although comparing themselves with their peers created uncertainty and self-doubt, they discovered that others shared similar sentiments and this reduced feelings of isolation and anxiety (Symeonides & Childs, 2015). The researchers concluded that because tutors evidently had so little awareness of the students' predicament, tutors should be encouraged to develop a personal online presence to facilitate meaningful online interactions (Symeonides & Childs, 2015).

Evaluating the student experience has become an increasingly important challenge for education providers since the introduction of a market economy into higher education (Browne, 2010). More recently, and especially since the Covid-19 pandemic, distance learning has become an ever more popular choice for students across the sector (Razavi, 2020). However, although surveys enable universities to learn more about the on-campus student experience, online students tend to be neglected, and, by definition, do not benefit from improvements made to on-campus teaching and learning provision (Kandiko-Howson & Matos, 2021). Listening to and including students in decisions about their wellbeing empowers them, and helps them to feel part of something larger (Baik et al., 2019). Montero and Suhonen (2014, p.165) caution that "profiling a learner without taking into account the emotional aspects that may hinder the learner's progress, can only offer an incomplete view of the learning experience". It follows that a detailed understanding of the affective burdens facing online students is necessary to allow online providers to tailor their courses appropriately (Montero & Suhonen, 2014).

In light of these considerations, our research questions were:

1. Symeonides and Childs (2015) suggest that building satisfactory intersubjective relations are key to successful online learning. Developing this research by deploying an interview schedule derived from real time diary entries, we want to learn more about how first year part-time distance psychology students describe their lived experiences of online interactions with each other and their tutors.
2. The generative metaphor of the 'journey' has been widely deployed in educational discourse. (Hughes & Tight, 2013) How do *distance learning* students specifically use metaphor to communicate their lived experience of online learning?

Method

With a foundation in both phenomenology and hermeneutics (Eatough & Smith, 2008), Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) provides a conduit for understanding how participants make sense of their world and the meanings their experiences hold for them (Smith & Osborn, 2008). A key aspect of IPA is the 'double hermeneutic' process, where researchers attempt to make sense of the participants' own sense-making endeavours (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 51). This 'restoration of meaning' method (Ricoeur, 1970, p. 8) renders perceptible the concealed meanings of an individual's lived experiences (Wagstaff et al., 2014), invoking the Heideggarian concept of 'Daesin', or 'being there' (Goldspink & Engward, 2019, p. 292). Our qualitative study explored distance students' experiences of their online study with a particular focus on their use of metaphor. Metaphor facilitates the connection between researcher and participant as the images conveyed enable the researcher to imagine and more deeply understand the participant's lifeworld (Shinebourne & Smith, 2010).

Four 1st year part-time distance learning students were purposively recruited to the study. As IPA requires detail and depth (Finlay, 2011), three or four participants are considered adequate (Smith et al., 2009). Within the qualitative research field, *transferability* of findings is emphasised over generalisability (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011). Having a modest number of participants presents no generalisability disadvantage. Furthermore, theoretical generalisability arises through researchers using their existing expertise to evaluate the data (Smith et al., 2009, p.4). Consideration of the study's characteristics and two-part approach, along with researcher experience meant it was important data collection was manageable to

facilitate the in-depth analysis to highlight individual experiences as required by IPA (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Noon, 2018).

Participants had to commit to undertaking the study's written journal element, as well as the subsequent online semi-structured interviews (Patton, 2002). Participants chose their own pseudonyms to reflect their individual voices (Allen & Wiles, 2016). A condition of applying to the online distance MSc course is possession of an undergraduate degree in any subject. All our participants therefore had prior experience of on-campus study. Institutional ethical approval was granted on 12th November, 2021, (PsychREC Ref No. 37606).

In Stage 1 of the study, participants completed four diary entries over the course of a month. They were asked to describe their weekly experiences of online study, namely: listening to pre-recorded lectures, undertaking coursework reading, and engaging with the learning tasks, and, where possible, doing so whilst minimising the timeframe between the events described and their recall of those events (Almeida, 2005). Diaries facilitated real time contextual data collection (Bartlett & Milligan, 2015; Xu et al., 2018) and therefore enabled the capture of information that might have otherwise been overlooked (Saeidzadeh et al., 2021). The diary template provided to participants consisted of two sections; i) environmental and study-related barriers and enablers (as derived from Lister et al., 2021); and ii) a second section that encouraged participants to write more freely about their overall wellbeing (Janssens et al., 2018). Diary entries were transferred into an analysis frame with corresponding themes grouped together, ensuring that experiences between participants during the 4-week period could be compared and matched. Analysing diary entries identified common patterns, tracked participant narratives, and provided insight into the interpretations of events (Morrell-Scott, 2018).

Guided by the Stage 1 diary entries, Stage 2 comprised online, recorded semi-structured interviews. This two-stage process, which facilitated the generation of rapport, resulted in personal and in-depth interview data (Saeidzadeh et al., 2021). Applying the same thematic grouping process to interview transcripts, the data from the interview transcripts were cross-checked against the diaries to unearth emergent themes, embedded in context (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). The data was analysed according to Smith's (2008) six stage inductive and iterative IPA methodology. Abstract, conceptual, and metaphorical themes subsequently emerged (Eatough & Smith, 2008). Narrative coherence was a final consideration throughout the analytical process (Nizza et al., 2021).

Results

Six metaphorical themes arose from the analysis of our participant data, as listed in Table 1. Half of our participants had experienced significant life events prior to starting the course. All of them had other responsibilities in addition to their studies. Our participants were still adjusting to their new student self and online interactions during their engagement with our research. It was a highly emotive time for them. The dominant affective tone of each of the six themes was anxiety. Vulnerability struck a subdominant note within each theme too, to some extent.

Table 1 Metaphors used by online students to describe their experience of online learning

Theme	Description
Plunging into the Deep	Participants' transformational moments and motivations for studying.
Imposter Syndrome	The questioning of participant student identity, self-doubt, and self-worth.
A Precariously Balanced Juggling Act	Participants' struggles to manage their different identities with respect to an impending sense of danger.
The Gift of Time	How participants felt trapped and pressured by time.
Hostile Territories and Friendly Fire	Participants' fear and anxiety about interacting online vs the reassurance gained in more informal settings.
House of Cards	How participants' wellbeing and studies are intricately woven together, making their wellbeing more susceptible to collapse.

Plunging into the deep

Before becoming students, all participants had transformational moments in their lives. For some participants, their postgraduate transition formed part of a greater career change, being "fully immersed in career-change education" (SJMMQ, diary, 14). The use of 'fully immersed' implies that SJMMQ conceptualised a complete involvement in their studies, with no breathing room. For SJMMQ, having to take a career break because of a child's illness meant that they couldn't continue in their previous role, spending it instead:

> really supporting my [child] … [and] arranging a new life in a different part of the country … The old career wasn't calling to me in the same way ... so I took that plunge. (SJMMQ interview, 62-63, 91-92)

For SJMMQ the changes were both practical – moving locations and resettling the family – and existential (the old career no longer called to them), suggesting no desire to return. A person's home and career are significant in defining their sense of self, and both shifted for SJMMQ. They went fully into their career change stage with the symbolic taking 'the plunge' implying the difficult journey ahead was inescapable, there was no going back, cognisant of the huge commitment involved. The linked water metaphors of *immersion* and *plunging* is suggestive of a cleansing or baptism, as their career was reborn in another direction after difficult family times. Enduring an immersion or plunge into water places a person in survival mode. There is an elemental dimension to these metaphors, a force of nature.

SJMMQ survived life-changing family events but experienced a huge existential shift to become a student. However, within all this torrent of happenings, SJMMQ had 'a gift' to hold onto, "something I denied myself 30 years ago, which is a master's qualification" (interview, 15-16). 'Gift' connotes something precious not to be lost, especially after so long waiting for it; a gift celebrating the rebirth into a new identity.

Ellis experienced a similar momentous shift before beginning study. Already making changes to their life and career, they suddenly faced an unpredictable threat:

> I actually was in hospital … which was like a bit frightening … and gone straight into the job and straight into uni and like this whole life change and was feeling really really burnt out (interview, 126) ... I mean it had been a period of extreme stress for various reasons and I think it was transformative (interview, 355).

Ellis endured physical changes adjusting to diagnosis and recovery; and existential threats, going straight into new challenges whilst still recovering emotionally and adapting to a new reality. The use of the term 'extreme' reveals how difficult this was, but there was a reward in its 'transformative' nature. The association of fire with feeling 'burnt' out is suggestive of later transformation being like a phoenix rising from the ashes. Having gone through these difficult times and burning out to leave nothing but ash, Ellis's "diving in and giving it a go" (diary, 246) indicates there was a refreshing relief to this new beginning.

Imposter syndrome

All our participants returned to university after significant time had passed since taking their first degree. They acknowledged that having time away from academia had impacted their self-confidence. SJMMQ described their first module as a "baptism of fire…this huge deluge of really complex information" (SJMMQ, interview, 547). Again, the use of transformative water metaphors is suggestive of a painful or brutal beginning – an overwhelming shock to the system, being thrown into a new, difficult situation.

For Ellis, the start of their studies was akin to feeling like an outsider in a strange land, with course elements feeling like 'a foreign language' (Ellis, diary, 232). This implies a confusing, disorienting and even lonely experience that they struggled to understand. However, studying qualitative research methods in the second unit helped Ellis feel more at home and welcomed, "like, oh old friend, I know you" (interview, 252-253). Feeling secure with the skills required provided Ellis with a connection that had previously been missing, while the phrase 'old friend' is suggestive of a comforting familiarity.

Both Rose and Sophie felt like 'imposters' however (Rose, diary, 185). As Sophie put it:

> it's like a really bad imposter syndrome thing where I think I'm really not good enough...it just kind of builds up over weeks and by the end of the module I'm just flapping, or I'm scared that I've not understood things right (Sophie, interview 197, 261-262).

The use of the term 'imposter' reveals Sophie's fear of being unmasked as a fraud, an incompetent student, suggesting a despairing imagined debilitating state. The use of the word 'flapping' illustrates a perceived lack of control over their studies, implying they could easily crash off course. The traumatic wrestle to

understand this new part of themselves was evident to all our participants, their external transition to student reflecting their internal struggles in adjusting to the meaning of this new identity.

Meaningful assessment feedback anchored most of our participants into their new reality and convinced them they were worthy students after all. Receiving good results gave Ellis a 'huge boost' helping them to 'feel more confident' (Ellis, diary, 244). 'Feedback was excellent', SJMMQ confirmed (interview, 505-506). Rose clarified how important feedback was to help overcome feelings of inauthenticity, writing: "My wellbeing has taken a dramatic upturn", and "I am much more confident in myself and what I can achieve moving forward" (Rose, diary, 307).

Rose's self-confidence and resilience grew as external validation of their abilities silenced the inner imposter, resulting in a feeling of pleasantly discovering 'holding my own' (interview, 473). Strength in this personal success had made it possible to fight off feelings of charlatanry. Rose's revised sense of self can be understood in the context of a previous Psychology A-level fail. From Rose's perspective, success hadn't 'come naturally' (Rose, diary, 21). The positive results and feedback not only quietened self-doubt but also saw Rose finally victorious over the legacy of a past failure.

A precariously balanced juggling act

This theme illustrates participants' sense of how they managed different roles by "juggling two quite separate lives" (Ellis, diary, 87), with it being "hard to find balance" (Sophie, diary, 94), while Rose relied on "juggling skills" to get through the week (diary, 89). All participants had multiple responsibilities and distractions beyond their course. Ellis vividly described these shared intense feelings:

> I'm not gonna lie like it feels like there's a lot of plates spinning, and if one thing goes... then the plates start getting out of control. (interview, 102-104)

Ellis' spinning plates metaphor highlights how precariously balanced life was, and how little it would take for it all to come crashing down. The connected 'juggling' metaphors signify a pragmatic struggle to manage risk at a time when identity and scholarly success were at stake.

All participants, bar one, originally started their courses full-time and expressed relief at becoming part-time, knowing they "could not have coped with full time as well as managing family and any leisure" (SMJMQ, diary, 142), especially since there was a feeling that even part time study resembled full time. One of the participants recalled some good advice provided by a tutor prior to embarking on study:

> She was just like: If you have anything else going on in your life... do it part time and it's like "thank you... I'm really glad I did". I don't think I would have coped doing my job and doing full time. (Interview, 435-439)

The 'juggling' and 'plate spinning' metaphors used by our participants are reminiscent of a live circus performance, where even skill and intense training is no guarantee for a perfect performance. There is also the extra pressure of having just one chance to get it right, where just one misstep can bring failure. For participants trying to balance their studies with all their other responsibilities, having one chance to succeed felt overwhelming.

The gift of time

Extending the metaphor of life being a balancing act, the 'Gift of Time' theme depicts the challenge students had in allocating sufficient time to their studies. Most participants were held captive by time and struggled to beat it. For Sophie, any time not devoted to working or studying was spent "worrying about falling behind" (Sophie, diary, 98), and Ellis questioned whether hours spent studying were ever "really enough" (Ellis, diary 224). This temporal relationship heightened their uncertainty around their endeavours.

Rose felt time was impossible to conquer, being 'always a barrier' (diary, 203). The use here of the 'barrier' metaphor suggests Rose felt discernibly powerless, experientially confined, or limited by time, whilst also chasing it, and playing "catch up" (diary, 291), or finishing "on the last minute" (diary, 396). For her, there was a sense of a physical experience, a gruelling obstacle course to be completed, racing against time. For Rose, any extra time was received as a gift, "golden time" (diary, 198), that made it possible to stay on track. The use here of the phrase 'golden time' suggests a precious gift, rarely given. A glowing light is also connoted, affirmed when Rose talked about a "window of free time" (diary, 124), where the free time is a conduit bringing light and possibility into the situation. In contrast was the implied shadow of a "deadline looming", (SJMMQ, interview, 194).

Two of the participants reflected on the "time and headspace" (Ellis, diary, 19) needed for their studies. For Sophie and Ellis, how well they could concentrate on their course correlated with how much time they had "to get some headspace" (Sophie, interview, 316). Although time was an issue for most participants, all referred to the course structure helping combat this. Sophie highlighted the practical ways to benefit from distance working and learning, using time "usually spent commuting to study instead" (Sophie, diary, 8), while Ellis appreciated how "the lectures are short" (Ellis, diary, 101). Even with intense feelings of being trapped by time, Rose acknowledged the positives, with a distance course providing:

> The opportunity to study further at this level, it saves time and works around my family; this has been great for me...when I get ahead it is liberating (diaries, 284)

There is an implication here that online learning came to the rescue, a silent super-hero, beating time and enabling fulfilment of ambitions, whilst allowing Rose to be present for the family. The strength of feeling expressed by the term 'liberating' conjures images of someone breaking free, pushing through barriers and being one step closer to their goal.

Hostile territories and friendly fire

For all participants, making connections with both lecturers and peers was important with an additional sense that the online environment lacked an intersubjective dimension. There was a feeling that it was "a bit of a double-edged sword" (Rose, interview 468 -469), suggesting that with the benefits gained from online interactions, there was also some pain from the uncertainty or unfamiliarity of its nature. The learning platform, while enhancing participants' flexibility, could not provide connections equivalent to those nurtured informally on campus, and so participants felt "out on a limb" (Ellis, interview, 193). Ellis explained:

> when I do poke my head above the parapet to post on a forum, I'm definitely sensitive about the lecturer's response. It can be so hard not feeling like we're getting much feedback or encouragement (diary, 152-154).

The parapet metaphor implies that Ellis experienced the online forums as hostile territory and therefore an unsafe environment, to be surveyed cautiously before bravely posting a comment. There was a conflict between wanting a relational connection on one hand, and the fear of what might ensue on the other. Sophie echoed this feeling, stating:

> The forum has been quite intimidating...because I'm aware that everyone will read what I'm writing but I don't know if they'll understand what I'm saying (Interview, 134-136)

Losing the usual nuances of speech engendered a new way of communicating, with the written form becoming even more daunting. "[I] just wanna keep my head down", said Sophie (interview, 199), hiding for protection. Sophie also struggled with one-to-one personal tutor interactions: "It felt quite disheartening because I thought they would know that I'm in their tutor group" (interview, 153). Although Sophie had reached out for help, the tutor's failure to acknowledge Sophie knocked confidence and compounded the sense of being an imposter who didn't belong on the course.

Conversely, Rose's interactions with lecturers had been positive, writing that they were "very supportive and informative", with tutors offering "really good advice" (Rose, diary, 31). Additionally, opportunities to meet alumni students with "similar ambitions [was] reassuring" (diary, 223). Rose could connect hopes to the future, consolidating possibility. For Rose it was the struggle "navigating Moodle [the VLE]...to stay in the loop" (diary 109-110) that added to anxiety around online connections, searching "everything with a fine toothcomb" (interview, 578) to ensure nothing was missed.

All participants felt that their interactions with their peers could be an emotional rollercoaster, with forum posts from other students causing "a sense of panic" (Ellis, diary, 175), especially when others "seemed to do really well" (Sophie, interview, 285), and thereby adding fuel to feelings of inadequacy already present. 'Panic' implies a physical response to stress – embodying pounding hearts and breathlessness – an instinctive reaction to fear, highlighting the strong emotions the experience raised.

Participants welcomed more informal peer interactions, enjoying "having a chat" (Ellis, interview, 165) that "felt more intimate" concerning things they "worried about" (Sophie, interview, 176) which was "very reassuring" (Rose, diary, 23). Knowing others had similar worries helped bridge the isolation, reassuring participants they were not alone in their struggles.

House of cards

All participants detailed significant anxieties which impacted their wellbeing. Sophie's repetition of "falling behind" (interview, 243, 249), suggested the fear of failing was constant, while Rose worried about "mental exhaustion" (diary, 76) and "fitting everything in" (diary, 152). This exhaustion, permeating to the core, left Rose susceptible to self-doubt, and wondering about enduring it all. The use of metaphors suggested the participants were on an experiential journey. Rose's heavy load had a slowing effect, while Sophie wanted to reach the destination without delay. There was heightened awareness of their wellbeing being the

thread that held everything together, encapsulated by Ellis: “I see how much wellbeing and studying are intertwined and if one starts crumbling it affects the other” (diary, 121).

While all participants made conscious efforts to protect their wellbeing, it was particularly important for Sophie and SJMMQ. For Sophie, the course made existing depression “flare up” (interview, 306) while SJMMQ noticed “spikes” in “anxiety” (interview, 779) when starting out on full-time study. ‘Flare’ and ‘spike’ suggest an aggressive emotional attack, a form of embodied pain that was necessary to defend against. After changing from the “relentless” (interview, 786) full time pace, SJMMQ’s anxiety “evaporated” (interview, 789), implying a release of pressure (interestingly using another water metaphor). Ellis also struggled with the impact of stress which initiated “meltdowns” (diary, 82) with this metaphoric phrase suggesting almost a physical collapse or burn out, made more dangerous due to Ellis’s recent medical history.

For Sophie, improvements in wellbeing were more complicated, as they lacked time to “get some headspace” (interview, 316) or freedom from the onslaught. Solace came from sharing feelings. Research participation improved Sophie’s wellbeing too: “It’s actually just been nice to talk about it with someone” (interview, 342). Sophie also reflected that choosing different study locations made a positive difference where “the change of scenery put me in a better mindset” (interview, 106). Use of the terms ‘headspace’ and ‘mindset’ emphasise how important mental wellbeing was, and how crucial to Sophie’s ability to self-manage and focus on study.

Rose enjoyed the unique moments of the online experience. A lecturer posting weekly songs was “a nice touch...it just relaxes you into the week” (Rose, interview, 542). These personal connections helped shrink the physical distance and reminded Rose of the personalities behind the screen. The intersubjective construction of online communication became more human-like and less frightening. Rose enjoyed the personal and professional development (PPD) unit which provided an important “connection” (interview, 633) to the future Rose was striving for. SJMMQ expressed a similar experience, finding comfort in having a clear direction for a future career: “my wellbeing has been enhanced...because I’m working towards something” (SJMMQ interview 791). Clarity concerning future ambitions enhanced wellbeing, with their present struggles becoming a necessary part of end goals.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore distance part time students’ embodied experiences of online learning. A dual phenomenological and metaphorical approach to data acquired through participant diaries and semi-structured interviews enabled us to chart our participants’ experiences over a brief but highly emotionally charged period. Participant use of expressive metaphors helped us explore their lifeworlds to gain understanding of experiences which may have otherwise remained implicit or unspoken (Shinebourne & Smith, 2010). Metaphor use highlighted experiential connections within each participant’s personal biography, and between participants.

Narrowing the focus of Lister et al., (2021), this study’s unique contribution highlights aspects of the online student experience most impactful to wellbeing. Time pressures and juggling multiple identities created anxiety and exhaustion, while negative tutor and peer experiences increased feelings of inadequacy,

unsettled participants' sense of self-worth, and raised existential questions around identity and authenticity. Conversely, positively experienced personal connections fostered wellbeing.

Participant accounts confirmed previous research into postgraduate study motivations with career change being the main extrinsic motivator for three participants, while their journey of self-fulfilment improved intrinsic motivation (Swain & Hammond, 2011). The impact of transitioning to university culture has previously been noted as contributing to changes in wellbeing and identity (Cage et al., 2021; Ribeiro et al., 2018). However, the present research emphasises the effect of transformational moments on participant motivations and sense of self before and during engagement with online courses. Our participants' lifeworlds morphed during periods of intense personal stress and uncertainty as a corollary of academic pressure, being plunged into the deep. Greater understanding of such circumstances and challenges would enable universities to provide more tailored pre-enrolment information and subsequent student journey signposting, providing a metaphorical lifejacket for the new student.

Consistent with previous research, all participants struggled with what they perceived as academic deficits: becoming students again impacted their self–confidence, feeling like imposters with an unworthy status (Stoten, 2015). This suggests an experiential conflict between two different selves: who they were before study, and who they were when a new student identity emerged (Swain & Hammond, 2011). Our work aligns with Aird's (2017) autobiographical research into impostership which posits an uphill climb towards confident mastery. However, it also highlights students' relational need for external support to help manage these feelings. Our study supports Aird's (2017) recommendation that more can be done by universities to meet the diverse postgraduate population's needs, suggesting targeted induction activities to ensure smoother, less stressful transitions to online learning and facilitating a sense of belonging.

All participants struggled balancing different life roles in conjunction with their studies (Jones et al., 2021). Viewed from the perspective of role conflict (Samra et al., 2021), participants' stressful juggling confirmed previous research. Our participants' lifeworlds could evaporate at the slightest provocation. Nevertheless, role facilitation saw interpersonal connections positively enhance roles, generating resilience (Wayne et al., 2007; Samra et al., 2021). While universities are now considering the multiplex challenges students face, more explicit time management guidance would also be beneficial to help students transition more smoothly between their different life roles (Samra et al., 2021).

Balancing multiple identities brought challenges of their own (Waterhouse et al., 2020); and most participants were also continually racing against time (Adlaf et al., 2001). Rose for example described time as a barrier holding them captive, preventing them from grasping something beyond their reach. This struggle to manage everything is consistent with Jones et al.'s (2021) findings and provides further understanding around how wellbeing is impacted by this temporal relationship. Our findings revealed that participant fear and panic induced by falling behind or running out of time was greater than the guilt they felt over time division, seeing time gained as a valuable commodity.

SJMMQ was the exception to feeling pressured by time - a function of unique circumstances - and developing effective strategies ensured that SJMMQ stayed focused. All our participants experienced their studies as a double-edged sword; while their online commitments meant they lacked time, distance learning meant they saved time too, indicating that their academic dreams could be fulfilled. This accords

with recent research into the contextual factors that make flexible study beneficial (Eberle & Hobrecht, 2021).

Corresponding with Holdsworth's et al.'s (2018) findings, lecturer validation was critical for improving feelings of self-worth and nurturing external resilience, while participant personal motivations fostered internal resilience (Southwick et al., 2014). Most participants reported that receiving encouraging first assessment feedback allayed anxiety. Our study highlights the importance of timely and meaningful feedback. Sophie told us about being affected by powerful uncontrollable emotions prior to receiving feedback, sufficiently intense for Sophie to consider withdrawing from the course (c.f. Hughes & Spanner, 2019). Feedback came only after the first unit ended, resulting in a prolonged period of extreme self-doubt, which may have added to Sophie's feelings of impostership. Furthermore, because the assignment was a 'high stakes' summative assessment, no change to the outcome was subsequently possible. Providing more opportunities for initial formative feedback prior to the submission of a first assessment would increase confidence, consolidate student identity, and reduce self-doubt.

Student interactions with lecturers varied in quality and quantity (Samra et al., 2021). However, where experiences were negative, it was generally due to contact frequency, rather than the nature of the responses per se. Such was the experiential intensity around posting on lecturer forums, that Ellis compared it to being exposed on a *battleground*. Lecturers evidently lacked awareness of their students' struggles, further support for Symeonides and Childs (2015). Furthermore, a disconnect occurred when tutors failed to acknowledge a student's public forum posting for example. Sophie felt like a disembodied voice, reinforcing feelings of self-doubt. Conversely, when experiences were positive, the lecturers' support and advice were invaluable. Reinforcing the findings of Symeonides and Childs (2015), our research emphasises how powerful lecturer interactions can be, highlighting the need to raise tutor awareness of their impact on the student experience, and encouraging a warm welcome to unfamiliar territory.

Consistent with previous research, all participants found peer interaction to be beneficial (Holdsworth et al, 2018). Although online peer interaction brought comfort and reassurance, this relational field also generated anxiety and panic, a function of the absence of normative face-to-face experiences (Symeonides & Childs, 2015). Because online interaction cannot substitute for real connections, students must adjust to a new mode of intersubjectivity, a reorientation of their habitus. This reinforces previous findings that online communication can be a participation barrier (Symeonides & Childs, 2015). Although the current research highlights that the obligation to post comments in online forums could be intimidating, the intersubjective gains were crucial for developing a meaningful lifeworld experience. Unofficial peer support networks enabled more informal and personal connections to form, mirroring real-life processes and dissipating anxiety. Having students volunteer to be tutor group contacts – hosting ice-breaker activities and peer check-ins for example – could generate a greater sense of community and belonging.

All our participants faced serious wellbeing struggles while studying, describing the feelings invoked by aspects of the course in ways almost suggestive of a physical attack. There was an experiential significance to this anxiety and stress – a questioning of individual personal meaning. With studies and wellbeing so closely interwoven, managing this was challenging, with the impact of one permeating through everything. The effect on participant wellbeing was subjective and varied, reflecting Lister's et al. (2021) research into wellbeing barriers and enablers, with wellbeing enhancers being positive interactions and feedback. These boosted confidence and silenced self-doubt; shared peer experiences providing reassurance. Furthermore,

personal touches reduced physical and virtual distance, providing vital intersubjective connections, and helped foster more resilience, becoming less susceptible to life shifts. Intrinsic motivation from personal goals also enhanced wellbeing, as participants worked towards their own life's meaning.

Conclusion

This study's aims were to explore how distance learning students use metaphor to describe their experiences of online learning, with a particular focus on their engagement with their course, their lifestyle and wellbeing challenges, and their interactions with staff and fellow students. Our findings illustrate the importance of understanding online learning and wellbeing journeys from a distance student perspective. Phenomenology and metaphor analysis provided insight into online students' lifeworlds, in terms of the practical challenges of balancing roles with time pressures, the existential struggle of forging a new identity, and the search for meaningful interpersonal connections. Six metaphorical themes arose from the analysis of our participant data. Metaphor is an experiential phenomenon that facilitates the expression of what is seen and felt. Conveying multiple layers of embodied, tangible and perceptual affordance, metaphor helps communicate painful experiences and grants access to another person's lifeworld. Focusing on the metaphors participants use to express their lived experiences provides a conduit expands into a person's embodied and experiential habitus.

Our study took place during a highly emotive time for our participants. Half of our participants had experienced significant life events prior to starting the course and all of them had responsibilities in addition to their studies. The metaphors uncovered by our analysis were stark and revelatory: 'Plunging into the Deep'; 'Impostor Syndrome'; 'A Precariously Balanced Juggling Act'; 'The Gift of Time'; 'Hostile Territories and Friendly Fire'; 'House of Cards'. The dominant affective tone of each of the six themes was anxiety, with a subdominant accent of vulnerability. Confirming and extending the work of Symeonides and Childs (2015), and Lister et al., (2021), our findings demonstrate that online distance learning is a journey of self-doubt and discovery interrupted by both traumatic and transformative moments as students strive to succeed against multiple threats to their wellbeing whilst forging a new identity. Whilst a small study, the findings from our work and their reinforcement of learning from previous studies (specifically Symeonides and Childs [2015] and Hughes & Tight [2013]), has implications for higher education policy and course provision and design. We recommend that universities devote resources to understanding online students' unique circumstances, to provide them with informed and effective wellbeing support at the start of and throughout their learning journeys.

Biographies

Catriona Adano is a recent MSc Psychology graduate of Manchester Metropolitan University. An experienced secondary school teacher, her interests are now in the counselling field, having completed initial counselling training and currently working as an emotional wellbeing practitioner, providing mental health support for children and young people.

Geoff Bunn is Senior Lecturer in Psychology at Manchester Metropolitan University. He was the lead designer and inaugural Programme Leader of the MSc/PgDip Psychology Conversion Award, his university's largest distance learning course. He is the editor and author of several books and has published research on psychosocial pedagogy.

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