

***CHILD AND YOUTH CARE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS  
OF ACTIVE LEARNING STRATEGIES AT THE DURBAN  
UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY***

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**Declaration**

I declare that this dissertation is my own work, and has not been previously submitted to any other Institution or for any other Degree award. All references quoted or indicated are acknowledged in the reference list.



Fathima Dewan

24/03/09

Date

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## **Abstract**

This study explored the students' perceptions of active learning strategies in the Child and Youth Care Programme at the Durban University of Technology (DUT), KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The key focus of the study was how the participants experienced independent study and in-class active learning strategies. Of interest, too were the participants' ideas of how the roles of their peers and educators could be improved to enhance the active learning process.

Data was obtained from questionnaires and focus groups conducted with the third year students. The qualitative research design involved the collection and analysis of the data and a review of the findings in relation to current local and international literature. This research highlights the roles that peers and educators play in independent study and in-class active learning strategies. The findings indicated that students and educators play a number of roles. The roles of peers included enhancing understanding through explanation, providing alternative ways of understanding, increasing quantity of knowledge and providing support. The roles of the educator included providing guidance, feedback, structure, clarification and skills. Recommendations are made for future research as well as improvements of this active learning process within the Child and Youth Care programme. The recommendations for improvement within the programme include assessment of group learning, curriculum development, evaluation of pedagogy and infrastructural support for student learning.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **Introduction**

“Our task as educators is to help students give birth to their own ideas, in making their own tacit knowledge explicit and elaborating on it. Teachers should support their students’ thinking but not do the students’ thinking for them or expect the students to think as they do.”

(Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986  
in Meyers & Jones, 1993, p. 6).

This dissertation reports on a study about teaching methodologies with students in higher education. This study focuses on independent study (self study) and in-class active learning strategies with third year students in the Child and Youth Care Programme at the Durban University of Technology. The study aims to inform the reader about the roles that educators and peers play in the independent study and in-class active learning process. The challenges are discussed as well. Based on the analysis of the study I make recommendations to improve the implementation of independent study and in-class active learning strategies.

### **The Child and Youth Care Programme**

Child and Youth Care work refers to developmental and therapeutic life space interventions that are used with children, youth and families whose healthy development is at risk. Child and Youth Care work involves trained people providing direct care to children and youth. The Child and Youth Care worker is responsible for using his/her expertise to maintain a secure, healthy environment that will help children and youth reach their full potential. In order to achieve this, it is important that a Child and Youth Care worker functions effectively within a team with different professionals, is able to take responsibility, reflect on their actions, solve problems and think critically.

The Child and Youth Care programme falls under the Faculty of Health Sciences at the Durban University of Technology. Prior to 2006 students attended a block of four lecture

periods per week for each of their four subjects with a few hours of skills training per week as well as two full days of practical work out in the field (preschool, children's home, place of safety, etc). Students and lecturers were exhausted on the three days of lectures because all four subjects and the skills training had to be accommodated into these days. Lectures were usually from eight to four o' clock.

A transmission model of teaching was used where students were basically given all the information required which they then just regurgitated in tests and examinations. Besides their two assignments and odd tasks they generally were not given opportunities to engage meaningfully with each other and the subject material.

In September 2005, the Child and Youth Care department went through an internal review process facilitated by the Centre for Quality Promotion and Assurance (CQPA) at the Durban University of Technology. In the three day review, pertinent documents were viewed and both staff and students were interviewed. One of the findings of the review was that the lecturers in the department relied heavily on using overhead transparencies and a transmission mode of teaching students. Students reported that they were exhausted by the long hours spent in the classroom taking down notes. Students were not actively engaged in their learning but were expected to be passive receivers of information. The recommendation was that innovative ways to facilitate teaching and learning in our department had to be explored. In November 2005 a strategic staff meeting was held to determine how we could act on the recommendation of the CQPA.

It was decided to change the teaching methodology within the curriculum of the department; independent study (the department called this self study) would be introduced as well as active learning strategies in the classroom. These new strategies were intended to encompass a learner centred approach. Independent study (self study) was the work students did to prepare for the next class session and they were given two periods per subject within their timetable in which to do this preparation. This preparation could be in the form of completing tasks, preparing for presentations or researching required information via journals, books and the internet. The library and faculty computer laboratory could be used for this purpose. The staff team felt it was necessary

to allocate time within the timetable so that students would understand that the independent study was just as important as the work done in class and preparation was necessary for effective involvement during the class.

Active learning strategies encompass group work, discussions, role plays, presentations, case studies, cross words, debates etc. which provide opportunities for students to engage with the subject material rather than just receiving it from the lecturer. Such activities allow students to interact with and learn from each other. The lecturer therefore acts as a facilitator rather than the expert, the intention being to aid students in the active construction of knowledge.

In March 2008 the Postgraduate Nursing programme, Child and Youth Care programme and Environmental Health programme merged to form the Department of Community Health Studies. This new departmental name was ratified at Senate in August 2008. There are five lecturers within the Child and Youth Care programme and approximately 120 students from first year until the fourth year (Bachelor of Technology). Ninety percent of the students are female.

### **Rationale for the study and research questions**

As mentioned above the new pedagogical strategy was adopted by the Child and Youth Care programme in 2006. Independent study (self study) and in class active learning constitute a two-pronged pedagogical strategy which was intended to help students to develop skills necessary for lifelong learning such as taking responsibility for learning, problem solving, critical thinking and communication skills. The teaching methodology adopted by the department prior 2006 was not meeting this aim effectively. It was therefore envisaged that by adopting this new approach, students would be actively involved in their learning whilst developing the skills mentioned above and be given the time in which to do this. Furthermore, the aim of the strategy was to use a learner centred approach, in order for students to develop a deep rather than surface approach to learning. (Saljo, 1992 in Morgan, 1993).

I currently teach two first year subjects in the programme and have been involved in using this approach since 2006. Although, in an informal evaluation in 2006, one class indicated that they benefited from independent study (self study), the views of the students have not been fully or systematically explored. I thus believed it was important to find out students' views on using this particular approach to teaching and learning. It would also be important to capture to what extent the staff within the programme are using this pedagogical approach.

I have also noticed that student performance in the subjects I taught were better in 2006/2007 than in 2005. Results for the subject Applied Development improved from a 45% pass rate in 2005 to a 73% pass rate in 2006 and 80 % pass rate in 2007. Psychology results improved from 59% in 2005 to 61% in 2006 and 78% in 2007. While I do not want to suggest a direct causal link between the active learning and the change in results, I see this study as providing additional and valuable insights into one of the aspects which could have affected the students' final results.

The key research questions addressed in this research were:

1. What are students' views of certain active learning strategies used in the Child and Youth Care programme at the Durban University of Technology?
2. What role do peers play in the active learning experience of students?
3. What role do educators play in the active learning experience of students?
4. What are some of the challenges faced by students in undertaking these active learning strategies and how can these challenges be addressed?

As the literature review will report there is a growing amount of evidence for promoting active learning nationally and internationally. Through this study I hope to gain insight on how to improve independent study and in-class active learning strategies within the Child and Youth Care programme. The findings of this study will also be shared with other departments within the Faculty of Health Sciences at the Durban University of Technology with the aim of creating awareness about the strengths and challenges of using such a teaching methodology.

## **The Chapters Ahead**

In this chapter I defined Child and Youth Care and described the background of independent study and in class active learning strategies within the Child and youth Care programme. I also noted the rationale for the key research questions used to guide this study.

In chapter two, I will review national and international literature as well as introduce the conceptual framework that has guided this study. In chapter three, I will explain my research methodology. Chapter four will focus on my research findings and discussion. Finally, in chapter five I will provide recommendations for improving the teaching strategy discussed in this study as well as recommendations for future research.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter focuses on the theoretical framework as well as the literature review that has guided this study. The literature review is centred on local and international studies about active learning. Active learning strategies are said to encourage students to take responsibility for learning and engage students in the process of constructing knowledge with others (Meyers & Jones, 1993). In reviewing the literature I found that active learning strategies had a very close relationship with constructivist theories of teaching and learning. Constructivism is thus explored as a theoretical framework for the study. Active vs. passive learning, constructivism, the role of the educator and the role of peers have been used as themes to organise the chapter.

#### **Active vs. passive learning**

John Dewey, a well known American educator who strongly advocated learner centred teaching stated that “learning is active. It involves reaching out of the mind. It involves organic assimilation starting from within. It is the child and not the subject matter which determines both quality and quantity of learning.”(Dewey, 1916, in Richardson, 1997, p.19). This definition clearly stated that learning was active and suggested that learning was a dynamic rather than static process and that in order to learn effectively the child had to internalise the information being taught to him or her. The definition also suggested that the focus should be on the child and not the content because how much is being learned and the standard of learning is determined ultimately by the child’s engagement with the subject matter.

Hokanson and Hooper (2000, in Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2006, p.169) stated that there has been a transformation in education “from instructivism to constructivism, from teacher centred to learner centred and from representation (to transmit information) to

generation (knowledge construction).” These three changes embody the move that an educator needs to make from a transmission to an active learning model of teaching and learning. This shift in education can be seen in the following paradigm shift as formulated by Barr and Tagg (1995, in Gravett & Geysler, 2004).

TEACHING PARADIGM	LEARNING PARADIGM
MISSION & OBJECTIVES	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Presents/provides traditional teaching.</li> <li>- Conveys knowledge.</li> <li>- Offers programmes and courses.</li> <li>- Improves teaching quality.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Strives to produce learning.</li> <li>- Promotes active construction of personal knowledge.</li> <li>- Creates powerful learning environments.</li> <li>- Improves quality learning.</li> </ul>
LEARNING THEORIES	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Knowledge is out there.</li> <li>-Knowledge comes in bits and pieces and is conveyed by the educator.</li> <li>- Learning is competitive and individualistic.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Knowledge exists on the inside and is shaped by individual experience.</li> <li>- Knowledge is constructed, created and acquired by the learner.</li> <li>- Learning is cooperative, collaborative and supportive.</li> </ul>
NATURE OF ROLES	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Educator conveys knowledge.</li> <li>-Educator and students function independently and in isolation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Educator designs learning environments.</li> <li>- Educator and students form a learning community.</li> </ul>

A transmission model is when students are passive receptors of information and are not really given an opportunity to construct knowledge so that it becomes meaningful to them. Students basically see the educator as having the expert knowledge and so rely on the educator for the information given. Student participation and interaction with each other is minimal. It is therefore more educator centred. Active learning on the other hand encourages the involvement of students in the process of learning (Meyers & Jones,

1993). According to Jacobs, Gawe and Vakalisa (2000) active learning is a participatory approach to learning. Learning is not seen as fixed but something which is evolving. Students also took responsibility for their own learning. The authors also stated that the success of how much the learner has understood in the classroom is dependent on how conducive the learning environment was to the students actively participating in the learning process. Lea, Stephenson and Troy (2003 in Johnston, Salie, Turner & Goosen, 2006) compared student centred and traditional approaches. In the latter, there were passive learning and transmission teaching. Minimal group work was done and students replicated what they had been told. In the student centred approach, however, there was active learning and interactive teaching. Furthermore there was more group work and students were creative thinkers who were better able to remember information.

Active learning allowed students to use higher order cognitive skills in the process of acquiring and retaining information (Woolfolk, 1995). According to Kane (2004, p.277) the characteristics of active learning were as follows: "It seeks to encourage independent, critical thinking in learners, encourages learners to take responsibility for what they learn and engages learners in a variety of open ended activities." Similarities between the characteristics of active learning and constructivism were seen in the characteristics of constructivism as proposed by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2006, p.108) who stated that constructivism included "learning as a search for meaning, learning as self directed and active, knowledge and understanding are constructed by the learner rather than imparted by the educator and learning is self regulated."

Entwistle and Entwistle (1992 in Morgan, 1993) conducted research to explore students' approaches to learning and understanding. Students were asked about what they believed understanding to involve in terms of their own experience and how they developed and checked their understanding of topics. It emerged that some students developed a deep approach to learning because they actively engaged with books and lectures and attempted to construct meaning from a variety of sources. The importance of discussion with others also emerged as an important factor to developing a deep approach to learning. This suggests that active learning encourages deep learning as opposed to

surface learning where the learner is just expected to passively acquire and then reproduce the knowledge. According to Saljo (Morgan, 1993) a surface approach to learning was seen as passively acquiring knowledge through memorization. This knowledge was then expected to be regurgitated. The deep approach to learning was about constructing meaning from knowledge which then helped in understanding.

Active learning strategies take many forms, namely, inquiry based learning, problem based learning, independent learning, simulation exercises, debates, role plays, presentations, case study and group work . The active learning strategies employed within my study were independent learning and group work. Independent study was the work students prepared for the next class session and they were given time within their timetable in which to do this preparation. The group work was then done in class as a way of providing an opportunity for students to engage with the prepared material as well as interact with and learn from each other.

Studies in the South African context, for example Buffler and Allie (1993) and Johnston et al (2006) reflected the effectiveness of active learning strategies. In the study by Buffler and Allie (1993), the active learning approach was adopted using cooperative learning and problem solving and this was found to enhance the performance of students. The study supported the more active learning stance rather than the traditional one. In addition the study done by Johnston et al (2006) revealed that students preferred more interactive lecture styles. They also believed that this style would influence them to attend more regularly and that it would also improve their academic performance. Sarah Gravett's (1995) article on "The creation of a context conducive to student learning" proposed a learner centred approach where knowledge is not imparted by the lecturer who is seen as the expert but that it is a context where shared knowledge is constructed.

In the United Kingdom, a study done by Crabtree (2003) on improving student learning using an inquiry based approach found that this approach differed from traditional methods of teaching because it was not only about transmitting knowledge but about exposing students to a range and depth of information as well as developing information

processing skills. Evaluation of the effectiveness of the approach revealed that students enjoyed the interesting topics covered, the opportunity to work independently and learning from others. The author concluded that using methods that encourage students to explore information and use inquiry is valuable firstly, because students take responsibility for learning and secondly, a deep approach to learning is inculcated. The study done by Fransman (1995) focused on how independent learning contributed to student achievement. Independent learning was seen to be an asset in terms of mastering the subject, feeling less anxious, relating theory to practice, achieving better academically and inculcating lifelong learning.

The usefulness and effectiveness of active learning classroom strategies were also explored in studies done by Sivan, Leung, Woon and Kember (2000) , O'Sullivan and Copper (2003) , Levy and Merenstein (2005) and Becker and Glasscoff (2005). The study by Sivan et al (2000) focused on the implementation of active learning and its effect on the quality of student learning. Student perceptions were investigated to compare active learning strategies to the traditional lecture. An attempt was made to identify the most effective characteristics of active learning. The quality of learning was measured by comparing how students approached learning before and after active learning strategies was implemented. A combination of lecture, seminar and simulation exercises was used. The Study Process questionnaire in Sivan et al's (2000) study was used to measure whether students approached learning in a surface or deep manner. The findings indicated that three out of four classes used in the study preferred a seminar to a lecture. The students' responses indicated that seminars made learning more effective in terms of creative thinking and applying knowledge as well as independent learning skills. The Study Process questionnaire indicated that there was an increase in the deep approach across the three courses studied. Overall the study indicated the importance of active learning and learning processes.

Similarly, a study done by O'Sullivan and Copper (2003) investigated the effectiveness of introducing active learning into a chemistry curriculum. The chemistry department formed an e-group to test various active learning strategies. The academic performances

of these two hundred e- group students were compared to those of eight hundred students who were exposed to the traditional lecture based class. Course performance and final examination scores of the two groups were compared. The result clearly showed that active learning had no adverse effect on student performance. It seemed to have improved performance. There was a statistically significant improvement in the course performance of the e-group as opposed to the traditional lecture group.

Using the active learning approach to teach theory, Levy and Merenstein (2005) explored the benefits of using readings, case study and group work strategies. Compared to courses that were purely lectures, the researchers noted that students in this class were able to apply the theories to other discussions as well. The study by Becker and Glascoff (2005) also focussed on assigned readings and the use of lecturer formulated questions that helped students focus on themes within the readings. The students' prepared responses to the readings were then used for class discussion. Student feedback indicated that the students found the strategy helpful as it encouraged engagement with readings beforehand and in so doing improved student understanding of the material.

Studies which indicated that active learning strategies fostered responsibility for learning were done by Johnson and Malinowski (2001), Salemi (2002), Ottewill (2002), Weimer (2003) and Keuker (2005). Johnson and Malinowski (2001) stated that getting students involved in the learning process encouraged them to take responsibility for their learning. Salemi (2002) stated that students take responsibility for learning because they respond positively to the expectations that the educator has of them that they will be responsible. Furthermore Ottewill (2002) stated that students are expected to take some responsibility for managing their learning. He called it self managed learning. Self managed learning differs from self directed learning in that in self managed learning the lecturer controls the learning outcomes, content and assessment. He argued that students need to take responsibility for making sure that all educational obligations are met and that enough time and commitment are given to assessment and preparation. Ottewill called this "immersion." Weimer (2003) stated that learning environments should be created where students are motivated to accept responsibility for their learning. Finally, Keuker (2005)

suggested that everything we do within the classroom indicates to students the beliefs and expectations we have of them. We need to move away from the educator leading learning to the students being co-participants in learning.

Studies have indicated that in order for students to take responsibility for learning there is a need for structure and guidance. This can be seen in the studies by Felder and Brent (1996), Ottewill (2002) and Cooperstein and Bradford (2004). Felder and Brent stated that the educator needs to provide guidance and structure in order for students to perform competently and accept responsibility for their learning. In addition Ottewill (2002) argued that the educator needs to realise that contact time and self managed time are linked. They should be “mutually reinforcing” and therefore the educator needs to plan both carefully. They should not be treated as separate with contact time being more important than self managed time. Educators need to realise that they have an equally important role to play in facilitating the self managed time and that students should not be left on their own without guidance. As Cooperstein and Bradford (2004) stated, structure is important to ensure that the correct skills and concepts have been learnt.

In the above mentioned studies, then, active learning was shown to encourage learners to take responsibility for their own learning, acquire a deeper understanding of concepts, remember more information, participate within a team and perform better academically. I shall now review constructivism.

### **Constructivism**

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2006, p.167) defined constructivism as “a theory which regards learning as an active process in which learners construct and internalise new concepts, ideas and knowledge based on their own present and past knowledge and experience. Knowledge is constructed rather than received.” Richardson (1997, p.3) stated that “constructivism is a learning or meaning making theory. It suggests that individuals create their own understanding based upon the interaction of what they already know and believe and the phenomena or ideas with which they come into contact.” One can thus see from these two definitions that constructivism advocates an

active stance in learning rather than a passive one. Learning theories which look at students as active participants in building knowledge are known as constructivist.

Constructivism is coherent with a student centred approach to teaching and the use of active learning strategies. Constructivists state that the transmission model of teaching does not give students the opportunity to connect old and new information nor does it promote interaction between students or between students and educator. Due to this learners are unable to have a deeper understanding of the material they are engaging with (Richardson, 1997). Tolman and Hardy (in Moussiaux & Norman, 1997) stated that there were five elements which guide constructivist teaching, namely:

- Activating prior knowledge. This means that the educator first finds out what students know about a topic so as to build on existing knowledge.
- Acquiring knowledge. This is when students are helped to find new knowledge which they can then fit into their existing knowledge.
- Understanding knowledge. Understanding knowledge is done in collaboration with others. Communicating with others is seen as an aspect of understanding and meaning making of the knowledge.
- Using knowledge. Knowledge is then used in activity so that further understanding can be gained.
- Reflecting on knowledge. This relates to looking back at what one has learned so as to gain further understanding.

Among others, Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky were strong advocates of the constructivist approaches to teaching. Where they differed was that Piaget focussed on the individual's cognitive and psychological processes called cognitive constructivism whereas Vygotsky focussed on the role that that social environment played on cognitive processes. The latter was called social constructivism. Vygotsky's stance was that knowledge is shared and created when we are in discussion with others. This is how thinking and knowledge develop and this is how one makes meaning of knowledge. He further stated that through this sharing and creating knowledge with others, understanding deepens and becomes more complex because one has to be able to comprehend and make meaning of the

differing knowledge systems of others. Students make meaning of concepts if they are able to share their ideas with others as well as work together on tasks (Stage et al, 1998). Jarowski (1994 in Stage et al 1998, p.39) concurred with this as he stated that key features of constructivism included, “recognition of the social construction of knowledge through dialogue and emphasis on the inter subjective construction of knowledge, in that knowledge is socially negotiated between significant others who are able to share meanings and social perspectives of a common life world.”

To elaborate further on social constructivism, Lev Vygotsky (1978) formulated the constructivist idea of the zone of proximal development. It is “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1935, in Crain, 2000, p.236). It is about how learners can be helped to solve problems and use strategies that are initially beyond their abilities. The role of the educator is to guide this process but responsibility for learning is shifted to the learners. Instruction and guidance by the educator moves the learner forward in introducing and acquiring the necessary knowledge and skills related to the particular discipline.

Lemmer and Badenhorst (1997) concurred that in terms of Vygotsky’s theory and practice, students need to be challenged in their thinking but guidance needs to be available. Educators should not only organise the environment so that learners can discover answers on their own but should also provide opportunities for learning by questioning, explaining and elaborating. The guidance given is called ‘scaffolding’. The term scaffolding was first coined by Wood, Bruner and Ross in 1976. It was used as a metaphor to look at the intervention of a more capable person (adult or peer) in the learning of another person who needed assistance to master the activity. The metaphor or the idea of a space between where we are now and where we could be can be traced back to Vygotsky’s “zone of proximal development” (McLoughlin, 2004).

The constructivist notion is that educators cannot just give students knowledge. They must give students opportunities to construct knowledge themselves so that the information is meaningful to students. Active learning strategies such as discussions, presentations, role plays etc. can be used for this purpose. The constructivist approach has a strong relation to student centred teaching. The constructivist approach also emphasises the importance of social interaction and collaboration in promoting learning. The role of the educator is then also to set up cooperative learning opportunities among students so that they may help each other in their problem solving abilities. By giving learners an opportunity to share ideas, multiple perspectives may be negotiated. Such activities are likely to enhance active learning. The comparison between the constructivist and transmission approaches can be seen in the following table by Marshall (1992).

	TRANSMISSION	CONSTRUCTIVIST
<b>Knowledge</b>	-Fixed body of knowledge to acquire. -Stimulated from outside.	-Socially constructed knowledge. Built on what participants contribute and construct together.
<b>Learning</b>	-Acquisition of facts, skills, concepts.	-Collaborative construction of socially defined knowledge and values. Occurs through socially constructed opportunities.
<b>Teaching</b>	-Transmission presentation (telling).	-Co-construct knowledge with students.
<b>Role of the educator</b>	-Primary source of information.	-A source of knowledge along with -others, materials, environment.
<b>Role of peers</b>	-Not usually considered.	-Ordinary part of process of knowledge construction.
<b>Role of the student</b>	-Passive reception of information. -Active listener, direction follower.	-Active co-construction with others and self. -Active thinker, explainer, interpreter, questioner. -Active social participant.

Constructivist and transmission view of learning

Adapted from (Marshall, 1992, in Woolfolk, 1995, p.278)

## **Role players in teaching and learning**

The definitions of learning found in the literature offer some insights as to the role players in teaching and learning. My study gave particular attention to the roles of educators and peers, these being two of the categories highlighted by Marshall (Woolfolk, 1995) in her comparison of the transmission and constructivist approaches. Turning first to the role of the educator, Stage, Muller, Kinzi and Simmons (1998, p.39), for example, stated that “learning is a dialogic process in which the teacher provides the appropriate experiential evidence and introduction to the conventions of the field to guide students’ learning.” This definition about learning suggests that the educator and learner are in an interactive relationship and that the role of the educator is to provide guidance to the learner so that he or she can become familiar and articulate in the knowledge of their particular discipline. Parker Palmer (1987, in Meyers & Jones, 1993, p.5) talked about education moving away from seeing the “individual as an agent of knowing to learning being a communal act.” Learning is thus seen as a process where both the educator and learner contribute to knowledge and understanding. They are seen as “co inquirers” (Palmer, 1987). In addition Gravett and Henning (1998, p.63) stated that “The university or technikon is more than an institution of higher education or a learning organization but becomes a community of knowledge makers.”

Vakalisa (2000, p.17) defined learning as “an exchange of one’s view of reality (content) with that of others, gradually refining one’s own understanding.” This definition suggests that interaction is important when constructing knowledge. Interaction with peers or the educator clarifies and deepens one’s own understanding of the world. The role of the educator and peers in self study and in class active learning strategies are two of the research questions of the study and therefore social constructivism was the chosen perspective of this study.

The educator has a vital role to play in scaffolding. Ge and Land (2004) stated that scaffolding contributes to knowledge construction and that scaffolds can be in the form of tools or techniques. A characteristic of scaffolded learning is that students are allowed to participate at a more complex level of competence as they feel more competent. The

educator withdraws during the learning process when she or he finds that students are able to manage on their own. Thus the educator is always in the process of observing students during the learning process in order to judge their level of competence and to adjust their assistance to the students as students' abilities develop. Roehler and Cantlon (1997 in Coughlin 2004, p.3) indicated that types of scaffolding included "offering explanations, inviting students' participation and verifying and clarifying students' understandings."

Gravett and Henning (1998) in their article "Teaching and dialogic mediation: a learning centred view of education" suggested that the role of the educator is to be a mediator between what the learners already know and do and what they still need to know and do in relation to the discipline. In addition learners need to be challenged but also given a measure of support in the learning process so that they feel comfortable to share their thoughts and ideas. The learners do not fear sharing opinions and ideas if they feel a sense of security, trust and respect in the classroom. In order to create a learning environment that fosters cooperation learners need to feel "connected to each other" (p.61).

Secondly, turning to the role of peers, social constructivism accords peers a central role in active learning. In a constructivist classroom learning is cooperative and collaborative. This participation and interaction between learners is seen as being important to promote learning. Collaboration and cooperation prepare learners for life long learning for which they will need to function well in teams. Thus peer learning is learner centred and moves beyond students just acquiring content knowledge (Anderson & Boud, 1996).

Peers were accorded a critical role in the conditions for constructivist learning proposed by Stage et al (1998, p.40). Such learning required "students' active involvement in the social processes of the classroom, the critical role of peers in promoting student's understanding, the common construction of knowledge that results when students negotiate their individual accounts and arrive at some level of agreement and the appreciation of multiple perspectives."

According to Saunders (1992, in Anderson & Boud, 1996) peer learning had the advantage of giving students opportunities to teach each other as well as learn from each other. It was a reciprocal learning process because it offered mutual benefits of sharing knowledge, ideas and experience. It was seen as “interdependent learning”. In addition, during the process of interacting with peers, students were exposed to multiple perspectives (Ge & Land, 2004). Due to this, students are able to challenge each others thinking or perspective. In this way they develop skills in forming arguments and providing justifications. This helps them develop their articulation abilities. In addition, students supported each other emotionally and cognitively to enable task completion. However Salomon and Globerson (1989, in Ge & Land, 2004) found that negative processes such as dominant members or those who do not want to contribute towards the work can occur during peer interactions.

Rubin and Herbert (1998), Marbach-Ad, Seal and Sokolove, Remler (2002), Prince (2004), Huang (2006) and Sims (2006) all looked at the role of collaborating with peers in the active learning process. In the study by Rubin and Herbert (1998) students were involved in collaborative peer teaching where groups of students planned and taught specific segments of assigned readings. Comments from the students indicated positive outcomes of learning from peers, doing research, working in groups, mastering a body of knowledge and using active learning strategies to involve classmates.

The studies by Marbach-Ad et al (2001), Prince (2004), Sims (2006) and Huang (2006) discussed the impact of group learning on retention and understanding of information. The studies indicated that small group work and active learning strategies made it easier to understand and remember the concepts being taught. Prince’s study suggested that collaboration improves and encourages academic achievement and student attitudes. It emerged from Huang’s (2006) study that peer teaching encouraged deeper understanding, higher application level and longer memory. Furthermore the study by Remler (2002) found that peer learning boosts the enthusiasm and confidence of students.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, local and foreign literature has been reviewed to frame the study. The review has drawn attention to literature related to active learning as well as explored constructivism as the chosen conceptual framework for the study. The role of the educator and peers were also explored as part of active learning and constructivism. The next chapter will look at design issues of the research.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

Research design relates to issues that a researcher needs to consider when collecting and analyzing the data for a study. Thus this chapter will focus on design issues related to my study. Aspects such as the methodology used, sampling, data collection techniques and the procedure for data analysis will be explored. In addition issues related to trustworthiness, credibility and ethics of the study will also be discussed.

#### **Methodology**

The interpretive approach which falls under the qualitative research methodology was chosen to guide this study. According to De Vos et al (2005, p.74) “the qualitative research paradigm in its broadest sense refers to research that elicits participant accounts of meaning, experience or perceptions. The qualitative researcher is therefore concerned with understanding rather than explanation; naturalistic observation rather than controlled measurement and the subjective exploration of reality from the perspective of an insider.” Thus the value in the qualitative method lies in the researcher being able to “obtain detailed, contextualized information.” (Cresswell et al in De Vaus, 2006, p.253). Similarly “interpretive research is fundamentally concerned with meaning and it seeks to understand social members’ definition of a situation.” (Schwandt, 1994 in Gephart, 1999, p.3). According to this approach, “knowledge is constructed not only by observable phenomena, but also by descriptions of people’s intentions, beliefs, values and reasons, meaning making and self understanding.” (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit 2004, p.20). One can thus see why the interpretive approach falls comfortably into the qualitative methodology. In addition, interpretivists conclude that human experience is a process of interpretation of meanings and that one’s daily experiences needed to be understood and interpreted in order to make sense of and create knowledge about the social world. Taking this into account the interpretive approach looks at experiences in a descriptive, in depth manner so as to derive meaning and understanding from the context that is being studied. (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004; De Vaus, 2006).

The approach was chosen for this study as it was seen to be more appropriate in terms of the research topic which sought to understand the experiences of students who were involved in and exposed to independent study and in-class active learning strategies. The intent was to make sense of the meanings the students had about independent study and active learning strategies in the classroom. I wanted to understand and describe their perspective by searching for patterns of meaning in the students' responses.

### **Sampling**

The site of this study was the Child and Youth Care programme at the Durban University of Technology. Thirty third-year Child and Youth Care students completed the questionnaires. There were only thirty third years in total. In addition 12 of the students volunteered to participate in the two focus groups. There were six participants in each focus group. Eighty percent of the participants were between 18 to 24 years and 20% were between 25 to 39 years. Eighty three percent were female and 17% were male. The sampling strategy was convenient and accessible and purposive. In other words, "A particular case was chosen because it illustrates some feature or process that is of interest for a particular study." (De Vos et al, 2005, p.328). In my study it was the third-year students. The reason for using third-year students was because they had experienced the transmission model in their first year and the active learning model in their second and third years of study. They were therefore in a better position than lower level students to compare the transmission model with the active learning strategy to learning. I wanted to gather as many views as possible on my topic and the third-year students had sufficient knowledge and experience in the subject area and were able to respond appropriately to the questions that I asked. (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

### **Data collection techniques**

The main data collection method was focus groups. There were two groups with six students each. "Interviewing is the predominant mode of data collection in qualitative research." (De Vos et al, 2005, p.287). In the case of focus groups it is interviewing done

in a group. According to De Vos et al (2005, p.312) “focus groups create a fuller, deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied.” In addition, “focus groups allow the researcher to investigate a multitude of perceptions in a defined area of interest.” (De Vos et al, 2005, p.300). The focus groups were held in our programme boardroom and each group lasted one and a half hours. Participants were seated in a circle facing each other. I started the group by welcoming them and introduced the topic to them. The issues of confidentiality and anonymity were discussed. Permission was asked for the interviews to be taped. The advantage of using a tape recorder was that I only needed to focus on the process and the participants during the interview and not worry about taking down copious notes. In addition I had a verbatim record of what was said by participants. This meant that the information was accurate. The disadvantage however was that it took a long time to transcribe. (Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Blaxter, Hughes & Tight, 2001).

The participants were asked a number of open ended questions related to the role of peers and educators in independent study and active learning strategies used in class. They responded openly and enthusiastically to the questions asked. I ended the session by thanking them for their participation.

The advantage of using focus groups was that participants were able to share ideas and opinions in a comfortable, non- threatening setting. Not only did the group participants generate more data than they probably would have done in an individual interview, they generated new understandings as they shared their ideas. Power was also shifted to the group as there are more students than in a one-to-one interview. Thus students were given more of a voice. However disadvantages included passive participants who would not share as much as they could due to dominant outspoken participants. Some participants did not want to share views in the group as they would probably have preferred to come across as socially desirable. I minimized this limitation by directing questions to these participants. Another drawback was that some of the participants who wanted to appear socially desirable might have provided responses that they thought that I wanted to hear as a lecturer within the programme. I tried to minimize this limitation by reminding the participants about confidentiality and anonymity. (Mitchell & Jolley –Holt, 1988; Rubin & Rubin, 1995; De Vos et al, 2005).

Data was also collected in the form of a questionnaire. According to Blaxter, Hughes and Tight (2001, p.179) a questionnaire involves “formulating precise written questions for those whose opinions or experience you are interested in.” The data collected from the questionnaire served to supplement the data from the focus group interviews. The reason for using the additional mode was that although a great deal of sharing occurred during the focus groups, the amount of information received from each individual within the group may have been limited. Thus the questionnaire was used to elicit these individual responses.

### **Data collection instruments**

A focus group guide was used which had a number of main questions (refer to appendix 3). The five issues which constituted the framework for the discussion were differences in the manner in which the participants were taught in first year as opposed to their second and third years, the role that their educators and peers played in independent study and in class active learning strategies and what they understood by learning, teaching and knowledge. These issues were informed by active vs. passive learning and the constructivist conceptual framework discussed in chapter 2. Open ended questions were asked to encourage the participants to express themselves freely. The open ended questions added richness and depth to my data because participants were able to elaborate on and clarify their experiences. The participants’ elaboration and clarification was aided by the input, the challenges and contributions of their colleagues in the group discussion. It was an appropriate data collection to employ in my study as I wished to gain an understanding of student’s perspectives on the issue of independent study and in class active learning strategies.

The questionnaire was given about two days before the focus groups were done (refer to appendix 4). I administered it in class to the thirty third year students. An advantage of doing this was that I was able to help some students who may have found difficulty in understanding certain questions. There was a high response rate because I collected the completed questionnaires at the end of the class. The questionnaires were made up of 3 sections and had both closed and open questions. The first section had questions related

to age, gender, resources used for independent study, the number of times independent study was done during the week and how often independent study tasks were given by the lecturers. The second section had questions related to the role of peers and educator in independent study and in-class active learning strategies and how independent study contributed towards understanding subjects. Participants had to rate their responses as agree, strongly agree, disagree, and strongly disagree or neutral. Open ended questions were used to allow them to elaborate on their responses. The third section had questions related to the participant's understanding of the concepts "knowledge, learning and teaching".

### **Data analysis**

"Data analysis is the process of bringing order, structure and meaning to the mass of data collected." (De Vos et al 2005, p.333). The questionnaires were analysed first manually. The analysis from the first section of the questionnaire was used to describe the sample. Three categories emerged from the analysis of section two of the questionnaires. The agree/strongly agree were categorised as positive responses, the disagree/strongly disagree were categorised as negative responses and neutral response was categorised as neutral. The responses on the questionnaire were then separated into these three categories and thus fed into the data analysis. The data analysed from section 3 clarified the participant's understanding of knowledge, learning and teaching.

Secondly the taped interviews were transcribed. Transcribing the interviews allowed me to become familiar with the data. The data from each focus group was examined and the participants' ideas were labelled. This enabled me to selectively retrieve and review information pertaining to certain labels. I then compared the data collected from the two focus groups and looked for labels that repeated themselves in each set of data. "The researcher seeks primarily to identify evidence that repeats and is common to several participants. One must be able to identify opinions, ideas or feelings that repeat even though they are expressed in different words and styles." (Krueger, 1998, p.7). The data from the questionnaire was then compared with the data from the focus group interviews

to check for congruent labels. However, the uncommon opinions from both the focus groups and questionnaires were also taken into account in the data analysis.

### **Credibility, trustworthiness, transferability and dependability**

The credibility of qualitative research is measured by its trustworthiness, transferability and dependability. Trustworthiness refers to whether the study is valid i.e. did it measure what it set out to measure? I can say that the study is trustworthy because the research questions were answered in the data analysis. The study was supposed to look at independent study and in- class active learning strategies which it did. Transferability refers to whether the study is generalisable to other settings. In common with most qualitative research this study's findings cannot be generalized to all situations because only one cohort of students was involved. According to De Vos et al (2005), a variety of data gathering tools can strengthen transferability. In this case I used the questionnaire and focus group interviews. Dependability refers to how reliable the study is i.e. to ensure dependability I used the same set of questions for both focus group interviews. I used consistent standards when coding both sets of focus group transcripts. I also looked for coherence between themes in both sets of focus groups.

### **Ethical issues**

When doing research one needs to be aware of issues related to privacy, confidentiality, anonymity, informed consent and truthfulness. Thus one needs to act responsibly when collecting, using and reporting data because as a researcher one is accountable to the participants, other researchers and society.

I got informed consent from the students who participated in the study. The purpose of the research was explained to them beforehand. Anonymity was ensured because they did not have to put their names on the questionnaire. They also were not named in the transcripts of the interviews. Confidentiality was discussed within the session. Participants agreed to keep confidential the opinions of others in the group. The participants were assured that the information would not be shared with their educators

and that their participation in the study would not compromise their examination results. Permission was gained from the participants for the interviews to be tape recorded. All participants were told that participation was on a voluntary basis and that they could withdraw from the study at any time if they wished to do so. Truthfulness was related to my integrity in reporting the data.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter the qualitative research methodology and in particular the interpretive approach was discussed. The sampling, data collection techniques, data collection instruments and the procedure for data analysis were elaborated on to allow other researchers to understand the context in which the data was collected when they evaluate its findings. Ethical issues and issues related to the credibility of the study were also discussed. The next chapter will focus on the findings that resulted from the analysis.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In the last chapter, I described how the data obtained from the focus group discussions and the questionnaires were analysed. In this chapter, I am presenting the data and discussing it in relation to other studies. I have organised the findings in terms of the research questions. Firstly I will discuss the perceptions of active learning then the role of peers and the educator. The challenges within each of these components will also be discussed. Each of these roles was identified from the recurring patterns that emerged from doing the analysis of the data. In addition, the data also yielded insights about the process of learning.

#### **Perceptions of active learning**

Active learning was seen as a process combining self study and in-class activities with different role players. The process began with self study which prepared and oriented the student to knowledge because the student had to seek out information for class using resources such as the internet and library. Active learning therefore did not only have to take place during class. It also took place before through preparation (self study). Preparation leads to confidence and therefore success (Salemi, 2002). In addition, Ottewill (2002) stated in his article "Student self managed learning: cause for concern" that in order to maximise contact time with the lecturer the student must come prepared to class.

The data indicated that self study took on various functions (indicated in brackets): Self study allowed the students to interact with the text which made him/her very familiar with it. "When you do self study you do it on your own and you are able to summarise the information for yourself and when you go to class you have an idea of what's going on" (group 1) (*The internalising function*). "Coming to class you are prepared and can compare your work with your peers" (group 2) (*Self study as preparation*). "That was easy for me or us because if you research information then you get an idea what the topic is about" (group 1) (*Self study as enhancing understanding*). In addition 63% of the

questionnaire respondents indicated that self study contributed positively towards understanding of subjects. This therefore reinforced the participants' comments that understanding was enhanced." We come back with researched information and we discuss it in class and then those are the notes we are going to use in our test" (*Self study as enhancing learning*) (group 2).

However despite the positive comments about self study enhancing understanding and learning, during the focus groups almost all of the participants indicated that there was a need for revision of self study in class. Some of the participants' comments as outlined in the quotes below indicate that self study was given by some lecturers for the sake of it and the products of the self study were not used in class activities. This had an impact on the learning and understanding of the participants.

"Some lecturers just give you addresses and when you get them they don't care whether it's right or wrong. They don't discuss it in class. When there is a test you find you got the wrong information. You start panicking. They should give a summary or overview" (group 1). "When you are doing self study you are not really knowing whether the information you are finding is right and then when you get to class some lecturers don't tell you whether the information you have is correct so you are basically stuck wondering whether you are learning the right thing or not" (group 2). "Not discussing in class made it difficult because we weren't sure whether the information was correct or incorrect because we didn't share it with the lecturer. This affects me as a student because the self study was given to us but we didn't discuss or go over it so that we can all have the same clear understanding" (group 2).

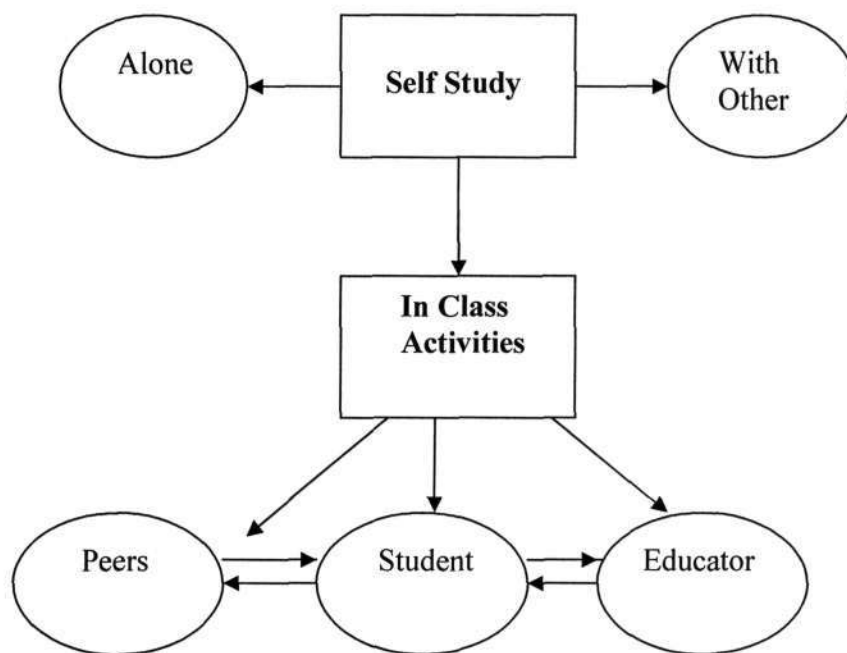
This finding concurs with Salemi (2002) who stated that students do find it difficult to separate information that makes sense from that which does not. Students therefore need to hear what the teacher has to say. Kane (2004, p.275) further stated that for active learning to be effective, the educator needs to be clear on the aims and objectives. "There must be a serious purpose and relate to the educational aims and objectives."

Further, Ottewill (2002) made a pertinent point when he said that educators need to realise that contact time and self managed time are linked. They should be “mutually reinforcing” therefore the educator needs to carefully plan both. They should not be treated as separate with contact time being more important than self managed time. Educators need to therefore realise that they have an important role to play in facilitating self managed time and that students should not be left on their own without guidance.

The second step of the active learning process encompassed the in-class activities which included role plays, case studies and crosswords. Responses to the questionnaires indicated that 70% of the students believed that class activities helped them to learn. Twenty percent were neutral on this issue, while 10% did not think they learned more from the class. Data from the focus group interviews suggested that students found the activities done in class helpful to both their understanding of material as well as their learning. They also saw their role as contributing towards their learning. “Self study and group discussions were both important because in group discussions we were all given a chance to participate” (group 2). “But in some cases the group discussions were helpful because you learnt from others” (group 1).

The finding in the focus group interviews and questionnaire are consistent with other research such as those conducted by Huang (2006), Keuker (2005), Salemi (2002), Prince (2004), Sivan et al (2000), Marbach-Ad, Seal and Sokolove (2001), Becker and Glasscoff (2005), Levy and Merenstein (2005), Crabtree (2003) and Johnson and Malinowski (2001) who indicated that active learning approaches led to better understanding and enhanced the learning process of students. During the class activities students were exposed to diverse interpretations from their peers regarding the self study material brought to class for discussion. “If you research information then you get an idea what the topic is about and you understand what is needed and then everyone discusses it because people come with different views and opinions” (group 2). The process can also be possibly seen as one of accessing a hierarchy of expertise (Tisdell, 2001). “You get your own knowledge and you also share and we work through what we know and then we talk to the lecturer” (group 1). In other words, the process suggested that self study

can be done alone and then a class discussion with peers ensues to reveal these diverse interpretations with the lecturer giving input at the end of the process. Thus the students' accounts of their learning processes suggested that they saw knowledge shared or held by some people as being more accurate or credible than the knowledge of others, i.e. themselves. "Self study helped me because in first year there was more spoon feeding and you just get notes on the over head whereas it is easier to go and find information and then try to understand it in class with the lecturer and in groups after having gone through it yourself and highlighting parts you don't understand" (group 2). Figure 1 depicts the active learning process described by the students.



**Figure 1: The active learning process**

### **The role of peers**

Peer learning involved students teaching each other as well as learning from each other. The literature review had indicated that peer learning contributed positively towards students understanding of a subject as well as skills in self directed learning , critical thinking, problem solving, communication, interpersonal and teamwork. In addition peer learning offered mutual benefits to students because they were able to share ideas,

knowledge, opinions and experiences. Boud called it “interdependent learning.” (Anderson & Boud, 1996). Comments from the participants in this study confirmed that their peers did have a positive role to play in both self study and in class activities. The following roles emerged from the data.

Role 1: “The Guide”

Peers enhanced each others’ understanding by explaining information in a simpler manner. The following quotes from the data are illustrative of this: “It was easier to understand and grasp information from people at the same level” (group 1).

“If we didn’t understand what the lecturer said we could ask our peers to explain to us because they use more simple words to understand” (group 2). “You find more information and get a better understanding from your classmates” (group 2). Peers also acted as guides in helping each other learn how to use resources. “Sometimes you’ve got the resources but you don’t know how to use them. So helping each other is important. Guiding the person for example in using the computer” (group 1).

Role 2: “Providing diversity”

Peers provided alternative ways of understanding and interpreting the same content. This provided depth to understanding. According to Brown and Palinscar (1989) and Johnson and Johnson (1979 in Ge & Land, 2004, p.10) ‘when students work together they may experience cognitive conflicts that prompt them to explain and justify their own positions, recognise uncertainties about beliefs, seek new information to resolve disagreements and recognise alternative points of view.’

The following quotes from the data are illustrative of this process:

“In our presentations and role plays my peers broadened my understanding of what was being done because we did things differently even when presenting the very same topic” (group 1). “Input and participation during group work results in sharing information and different views and opinions” (group 2).

Role 3: “Multiplying ideas”

Peers also increased the quantity of knowledge gained by the student. This provided breadth to understanding. "They were helpful because when we work together you share more ideas than being alone" (group 1).

Role 4: "Enhancing learning"

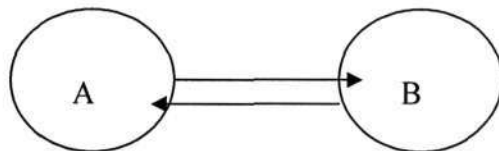
Another role that was identified was that of peers recognising the different intellectual abilities of each other and working together in way that enhanced learning.

The following quote illustrates this: "Intellectually we are all not on the same level in class and to be in a group where you can learn from others helps a lot rather than waiting for the lecturer to give you the information because you find more information and get a better understanding from your classmates" (group 2). "But in some cases the group discussions were helpful because you learnt from others" (group 1).

The data also suggested that peers occupied different positions in relation to each other in the learning process. Positions discovered were:

Position 1: "Companions"

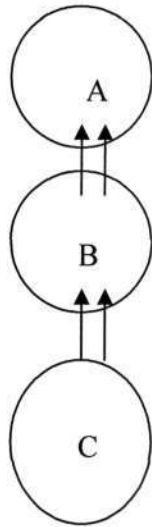
"Sometimes you go together to find information and then try together to summarise it according to your own understanding" (group 1). This idea suggests that peers worked side by side as companions in order to find information during self study. Figure 2 refers.



**Figure 2: The companion**

Position 2: "The Mountaineers"

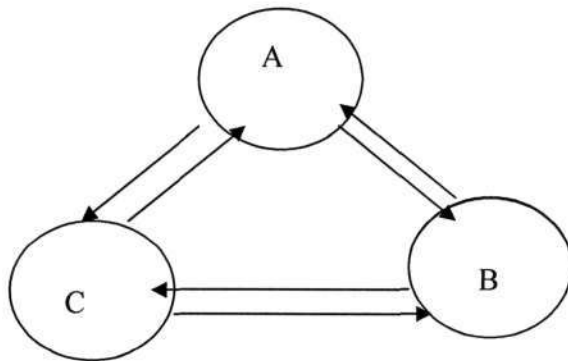
"Sometimes we would go into a group only to find out that our understanding is less or more than others. That helps us grow one another and achieve whatever goal that needs to be achieved" (group 2). This idea suggests that when in a group some students were below and some above. The ones above pulled up the ones below in order to reach the top of the "mountain" (goal/understanding). Figure 3 refers.



**Figure 3: The mountaineers**

Position 3: "The Collaborators"

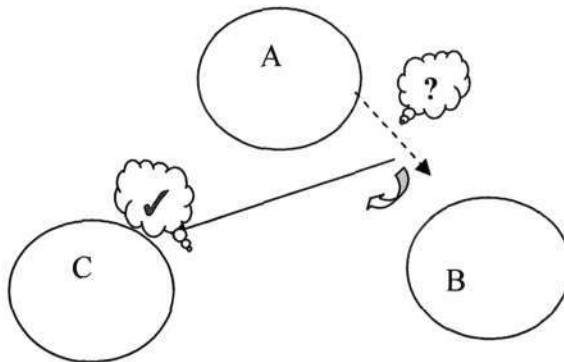
"Everybody has their own opinion so when you are doing class discussions or group discussions everybody will have an input and then settle on one thing you want to share with the class" (group 1). This idea suggests that peers worked together and then reached consensus on which part of the information to share with the class. Figure 4 refers.



**Figure 4: The collaborators**

Position 4: "The Strategists"

This idea suggests that students knew who to go to for help. "You know which one understands more and who to go to when you are stuck and ask for help" (group 2). "If I go to the internet and can't find the information I could go to someone else who used the book. It was helpful with peers because you sort of network and you decide what will work for you" (group 2). Figure 5 refers.



**Figure 5: The strategist**

Peers' roles in providing diversity appeared in all of the above mentioned "positions".

The findings from my data about the role of peers concurred with those of other researchers such as Rubin and Herbert (1998) who noted that interaction and cooperation are conducive to learning and Levy and Merenstein (2005) who stated that peer learning offered support to those students struggling with difficult material. Boud in Gwee (2001, p.1) stated that "students learn a great deal by explaining their ideas to others and by participating in activities in which they can learn from others."

Many of the participants' comments suggested that interaction, cooperation and peer learning were evident during self study and in-class activities. This finding also concurs with Keuker (2005) and Salemi (2002). During peer interactions students are able to challenge each other's thinking or perspective. In this way they develop skills in forming arguments and providing justifications. This in turn develops their articulation abilities. Data from the questionnaires confirmed that peers were seen as playing a positive role in

learning, with nearly three-quarters (73%) of the respondents reporting that peers played a positive, rather than negative or neutral role in their learning.

However despite the positive role that peers played, one fifth of the participants found the role of peers unhelpful in the learning process. Thus the challenges that were experienced when peers worked in a group will be examined as well. According to the literature on group structure, the unique talents and personality traits of each individual within a group can have an influence on how a group functions. These personality traits for instance can impact on the role that an individual assumes within the group. Thus a number of interactive dynamics have emerged which confound the positive roles of working with peers. These include:

#### *"The Loafers"*

Some group members did not want to do their share of the work and relied on others to do the work for them. "Sometimes more work was done by one person and the other team members won't contribute and maybe the work done by one person was too little. That means that if there are marks involved you get a lower mark" (group 2).

#### *"The Loud Mouths"*

Some group members were seen to be dominant. "Maybe if you are put into a group where your peers think faster than you, they are going to be dominant in the group and you don't have a say" (group 2). Some group members felt threatened by the dominant members of the group and it thus impacted negatively on sharing of information within the group. "Sometimes you get people in your group who do nothing and then those who dominate in a group. You just sit and listen and then everything they say goes. You sit with your own thinking and don't share anything because you feel threatened" (group 1). These findings concur with Salomon and Globerson (1989 in Ge & Land, 2004, p.11) who state that negative processes such as dominant group members or people not pulling their weight can affect peer interactions.

### "The Helpless"

Some group members were too dependent on others and took on the role of the weak. "Also the unhelpful part it's about dependence. Most of us are too dependent on other people. Some people expect people to feel sorry and do it for them" (group 1). People who exhibit "learned helplessness" have negative feelings such as a sense of hopelessness. They believe that events are beyond their control and nothing they do matters (Baron & Byrne, 1994).

### **The Role of the Educator**

The findings indicated that the educator played key roles in the self study and in-class active learning process. These roles will be examined in this section.

### "The Guide"

This role related to direction and guidance by the educator. Data from the questionnaire indicated that 70% of the participants felt that clear directions were given by the lecturer which helped them to undertake self study, with only 10% stating that clear directions were not given. A few of the focus group participants' comments indicated that guidance was given and that expectations were clear as illustrated by the following quote: "They usually gave us the topics or references we could use, when it's due and the questions for self study" (group 1). "There was this one lecturer who will tell us at the end of the lecture to go and research this and then you know that the following week we are going to come up with the information" (group 2).

Although the data from the questionnaire indicated that students were given clear directions, the focus group interview data indicated a strong pattern of poor guidance and unclear expectations by the educator. "At least give us a first step because there is so much information on the internet. Some of it is wrong and does not make sense. You need a little clue to get where you are going. If you are just given a topic there are a thousand links" (group 1). "At the beginning before they give us the self study they need to give us clear instructions and guidelines in terms of how to go about getting what is expected of us" (group 2).

Thus, the students would have preferred that the educators take on the following roles so as to enhance their learning process.

#### "The Trouble Shooter"

Feedback is needed in order for the student to know where and how to improve their performance. "Also the lecturer needs to clarify why they feel we are not good enough because they tell us the presentation was fine but not good enough so you don't know where exactly you went wrong" (group 2).

#### "The Scaffolder"

The educator needs to provide structure and guidance to the students. Scaffolding is seen as support for learning where a more competent person assists one in the learning process so as to reach a level of competence. The educator also needs to provide clarification on the information that has been researched and discussed by the students." Sometimes the lecturer forgets to be in charge. They should not only focus on what we know. We are here to learn. They need to listen to us but also put us all straight so that we can write our notes" (group 1). Palinscar and Brown (1984 in Ge & Land, 2004, p.6) suggested that instructional methods be used as scaffolds so as to assist students in achieving learning goals. Scaffolds are both "adjustable and temporary". This means that students participate at an increasing level of complexity once they feel more competent. The educator withdraws during the learning process when she finds that students are able to manage on their own.

#### "The Skills Developer"

Some students credited their lecturers with the ability to be able to give them specific, information-gathering and technical skills. "At the beginning of the year before they give us self study they should provide us with skills on how to do library work or use the computer" (group 2). To give you more ways or places to go about finding the information because I noticed this year is all about the internet. The internet is not the

only form of doing research so that even in future the students know that I can go to the library to research information” (group 1).

The findings here are consistent with Cooperstein and Bradford (2004); Weimer (2003) and Felder and Brent (1996). Weimer stated that guidance and direction from the teacher was important in order to take understanding to the next level. Cooperstein and Bradford (2004) in their article “Beyond active learning: a constructivist approach to learning” suggested that structure was important because they argued that without it how does one know if the correct skills and concepts have been learned. There was therefore a need for guidance and clear expectations. They suggested that “scaffolding” be used as a structure which is supportive i.e. using small steps to guide students through the process of learning. Dewey in Cooperstein and Bradford (2004, p.145) further illustrated the need for structure by stating that “Not all experiences are equally educational. Everything depends on the quality of the experience. We control the quality of learning through our choice of activities and our determination of structure.”

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has attempted to discuss the findings from data collected. This included the perceptions of students related to active learning. The role of peers and the role of the educator were also discussed. The next section will focus on providing some recommendations which follow from these findings.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The findings of the study comprised the students' perceptions of active learning, the role of peers, and the role of the educator, the function of self study and the function of in-class activities. In chapter 2, I discussed active learning and social constructivism as the chosen theoretical and conceptual frameworks which guided my study. Based on the findings of my study and others' empirical and theoretical work on active learning, the recommendations will focus on group work in education, assessment of group learning, curriculum development, evaluation of pedagogy and academic infrastructural support for student learning.

In summary, the findings revealed that an active learning process was seen as a combination of self study and in-class activities with different role players i.e. the learners, peers and the educator. The process began with self study which prepared and orientated the student to knowledge because the student had to seek out information using resources e.g. the internet and library. The second step encompassed the in-class activities which included role plays, case studies and crosswords. This is where students were exposed to diverse interpretations from peers regarding the self study material brought to class for discussion. The lecturer gave input during the in-class activities.

#### **Group work in education**

"In cooperative learning, groups are organised and tasks are structured so that the students must work together to reach a goal, solve a problem, make a decision or produce a product. Learners are responsible for learning and for helping their fellow group members learn or practice skills. There is a strong emphasis on cooperation and interdependence of group members. Individual accountability is still stressed" (Gawe, 2000, p.190). One of the focus areas of my study was the role of peers in independent study and in-class active learning strategies. The literature review revealed that collaborating with peers in the active learning process encouraged deeper understanding, developed better retention and higher application and enhanced the academic

performance of the students. The conceptual framework also revealed that in a constructivist classroom learning was cooperative and collaborative. Participation and interaction between learners and between learners and the educator were seen as being important to learning. During the data analysis of this study many of the participants' comments suggested that interaction, cooperation and peer learning were evident during self study and in-class activities. However, despite the positive role that peers played, one fifth of the participants found the role of peers unhelpful in the learning process. A number of interactive dynamics emerged which confounded the positive roles of working with peers. These included group members who did not do their share of work and relied on others to do the work for them, dominant members, members who felt threatened by the dominant members, members who did not want to share information with the group and group members who were too dependent on others.

In view of these findings, my recommendation is that the educator should set ground rules with the students before attempting to do group work. These ground rules should relate to how the group should interact in terms of sharing the workload, respect and listening to others opinions. The educator should also observe the groups so that he or she is able to identify problems and check how the groups are functioning with the view to mediating if problems arise. Unequal participation arises when either a group member is dominant or does not want to contribute towards the group discussion. To address these issues, the educator can assign a silent role of scribe to the dominant member and the quiet member could be assigned the role of group spokesperson or facilitator. There should also be a rotation of roles eg. scribe, facilitator, spokesperson so that every person is given a chance to participate in a different manner. In addition groups should be reformed often so that members are not stuck with the same dominating or non participating members. (Barkley, Cross & Major, 2005).

Johnson, Johnson and Smith (1991, p.17) stated that conditions that promote group cooperation are when there is "clearly perceived positive interdependence, frequent use of the relevant interpersonal and small group skills and frequent and regular processing of current functioning to improve the group's future effectiveness." The educator therefore

needs to create such conditions when using group work strategies by having a discussion with the group about how things are going or administering a short questionnaire to gain feedback.

The data analysis also indicated that the educator played key roles in the self study and in-class active learning process. However, the focus group data indicated a strong pattern of poor guidance and unclear expectations by the educator. Students therefore recommended that the educator needs to provide feedback on student performance, provide structure and guidance and clarify information that has been researched and discussed by the students. In view of this the recommendation is that “the educator should explain the activity, clarify the objectives, outline the procedures, query the students for understanding and let students ask questions” (Barkley, Cross & Major, 2005, p.69).

### **Assessment of group learning**

According to Johnson, Johnson and Smith (1991, p.17), one other condition that promoted group cooperation is “clearly perceived individual accountability and personal responsibility to achieve the group’s goals.” In order to ensure that the groups function effectively it is important to assess the task as well as the group process. A strategy is to set a group based task, keeping an account of the work being done by individual group members. Marks could be allocated for process as well as product as indicated by one of the participant’s comments “Another thing that makes groups effective is marks. When there are no marks allocated then the groups definitely won’t be effective.” (group2). In addition, self and peer assessment can be used as assessment tools. The self assessment allows the students to reflect on what they have learnt as well as the process of learning. The peer assessment allows the members to assess each others competence and contribution. It is suggested that the criteria for the peer assessment be devised with the students (Barkley, Cross & Major, 2005).

## **Curriculum development**

“The key to curriculum development is to forge educationally sound and logical links between planned intentions, course content, teaching and learning methods and the assessment of student learning while taking full account of student characteristics”. (Newble & Cannon, 1995, p.70). According to Ansu Erasmus’s article, “Design considerations in the development of a new academic programme structure” (2005, p.4), a learner centred curriculum is one in which “students take responsibility for their own learning and become independent learners, suitable print and/or electronic learning materials are available to support learning and learning time (individually and in groups) is increased”. In addition the National Plan for Higher Education in South Africa (2001) aims to develop a higher education system that will meet the development needs of our country through well planned teaching, learning and research programmes. In view of this, the recommendation is that educators within the Child and Youth Care programme meet to discuss and decide on consistency in terms of implementing self study and in-class active learning strategies. New staff members as well as part time staff should also be made aware of the teaching method so as to maintain consistency. In addition, when developing independent study and in-class strategies the educators should consider the resources to be used, be willing to experiment with different active learning methods and take into account students’ abilities. (Newble & Cannon, 1995).

## **Evaluation of courses/pedagogy**

Newble and Cannon (1995, p.88) stated that “in teaching you should be progressively evaluating what you are doing and how the course design and plans are working out in practice”. Hunkins (1980, in March & Stafford, 1988) further stated that the goal of evaluating pedagogy was to make improvements as well as identify achievements and problems during the implementation stage. According to the National Plan for Higher Education in South Africa (2001), curriculum should be reviewed on an ongoing basis to ensure that best practice is implemented and that knowledge and skills are continually updated. The Durban University of Technology’s policy and procedure for programme review and evaluation (2003) further stated that programme review and evaluation of learning programmes are essential to enhance the quality of teaching, learning and

assessment and to ensure that academic staff is made accountable for the quality of the courses they teach. Evidence of student feedback about independent study and in-class active learning strategies could be through questionnaires, focus groups and student-staff liaison committees. The policy further states that best practice is seen through the establishment of a team within the programme who evaluate the teaching, learning and assessment practices. The educators could observe each other and provide feedback about how they implement independent study and in-class active learning strategies. Although no data from my study referred directly to course evaluation, the associated literature just mentioned lends weight to the recommendation that academic staff should continuously review self study and in-class active learning strategies. Such a review would improve the implementation of strategies.

### **Academic (infrastructural) support for student learning**

The National Plan for Higher Education in South Africa (2001, p.3) proposed that the key issue of higher education institutions was to “equip students with the skills necessary to function in modern society. These skills were computer literacy, information management, communication and analytic skills”. In addition, the Durban University of Technology’s strategic plan (2005-2010, p.4) stated that “the goal of the university is to provide student centred and transformative education in developing technological capabilities and cognitive skills” and “enhance resources and opportunities for student collaboration in scholarly and creative activities.” In the findings the students indicated that they require information gathering and technical skills eg. how to use the library and computer. In addition students require more places are given on where to source information as some educators relied heavily on the internet only. My recommendation is that educators within the Child and Youth Care Programme liaise with the Institution’s librarians to facilitate sessions where students are able to access books, journals and electronic data bases. Students are orientated at the beginning of each year but this should be done more frequently during the course of the year. Computer skills and using the computer to source information should be designed as part of the curriculum. In addition more competent students should be paired with less competent ones in order to work together so as to develop skills in computer and information literacy.

## **Future research**

As academics the literature encourages us to use active learning strategies yet there are still many academics that still use the transmission model of teaching. I believe that future research needs to be conducted within the Durban University of Technology to determine to what extent active learning strategies are being implemented across faculties. In addition further research needs to be conducted in terms of which active learning strategies in particular are more effective in enhancing learning and understanding. If the higher education system (especially the Durban University of Technology) wishes to prepare students effectively for their future roles in society and their workplace, then it seems imperative that active learning strategies need to be adopted and implemented and that educators should guide and support learners and create a context that supports student learning.

## **Conclusion**

The value of independent study and in-class active learning strategies is that they made learning meaningful for the students. From the findings in this research it became clear that the strength of independent study and in-class active learning strategies was that they deepened the students' understanding of concepts and provided opportunities for collaborating with peers. It is, however, important to note that the educator plays a key role in guiding and facilitating independent study and in-class active learning strategies and that before attempting to use group work students need to be taught how to work effectively in groups.

“Giving students opportunities to be responsible and accountable for their own learning prepares them for effective performance in their personal and working lives, enhances commitment to their studies, promotes deeper understanding, builds confidence in their ability to learn and helps the development of high level personal qualities and skills.” (Stephenson, 1992 in Morgan, 1993).

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## **APPENDIX 1: PROFORMA LETTER REQUESTING CONSENT FROM STUDENTS**

31 August 2007

Dear Participant

My name is Fathima Dewan and I am studying towards a Masters in Education (Higher Education) degree at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). The title of my study is "Child and Youth Care students' perceptions of active learning strategies at the Durban University of Technology." The focus of the study is to listen to students' experiences of independent study (self study) and active learning strategies used in the classroom.

I request your participation in my study because you are seen to be the expert in terms of what it was like to be learning in the Department's classes over the last three years. As a participant you will be involved in completing a short written questionnaire and a one hour semi structured group interview with five to eight other participants from your class. In the focus group interview, you, together with these other participants, will discuss how you learned and how you have been taught in the Child and Youth Development programme. The questionnaire will be used to supplement the information received from the focus group interviews. Through your input and participation the Department of Child and Youth Care will be able to evaluate the teaching and learning strategies it has adopted with a view to improving them. In this way, both the students and the Department will benefit from the improvements made.

Participation in the study is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time. Should you withdraw, there will not be any negative consequences for you. You will not have to pay in order to participate in the study. Neither will you receive any financial compensation for your involvement. The results of my study will only be made available early next year so your results in no way will be compromised by your participation in the study. Your name will not be mentioned in my research report. If I use anything you say in my report, I shall do so in such a way that you cannot be identified by anyone other than those in the group discussion. Nor will the details of what you say be revealed to other staff members.

The interview will be tape recorded so that the correct information is captured. The research tapes and data will be stored in a secure, locked up cabinet in my office. Upon submission of the dissertation the data will be stored in the Faculty of Education at UKZN for a period of five years.

If you have any queries you may contact my supervisor Frances O'Brien at [Obrien@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:Obrien@ukzn.ac.za)

My contact details are (031) 2042238 or [fathimad@dut.ac.za](mailto:fathimad@dut.ac.za)

Sincerely  
Fathima Dewan

## **APPENDIX 2: PROFORMA CONSENT FORM**

### **Declaration**

I \_\_\_\_\_ (full name of participant) hereby confirm that I understand the contents of this document and the nature of the research project, and I consent to participating in the research project.

I understand that I am at liberty to withdraw from the project at any time, should I so desire.

**SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT**

**DATE**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## **APPENDIX 3: FOCUS GROUP SCHEDULE**

### **Focus Group Schedule**

**Topic: Child and Youth Care Students' Perceptions of Active Learning strategies at the Durban University of Technology.**

**Date:**

**Time:**

**Gender:**

**No. of participants:**

**For the purposes of the interview, the term self study will be used as students are familiar with this term as it was introduced into the timetable last year. In the proposal, the term independent study equates to self study.**

**For the purposes of the interview, the term lecturer instead will be used instead of educator as students are familiar with this colloquial term used at the Durban University of Technology.**

Introduce myself and the purpose of the focus group. Thank students for their participation. Outline the ethical considerations and ask for permission to tape record the session. State that the tapes will only be listened to by the researcher (myself), that the tapes will be kept in a secure, locked cupboard in my office and that after submission of the dissertation, the data will be stored in the Faculty of Education (UKZN) for a period of five years.

**1. Do you remember any differences between what you and your lecturers did in your second/third year of study as opposed to your first year of study in this Department.**

#### **2. Learner's role**

**2.1 What kinds of activities did you have to do last year and this year in order to do work in the various subjects?**

**2.2 Were (mention the self study and active learning strategies mentioned) these strategies helpful to you?**

**2.3 In which ways do you think the strategies helped you/In what ways did they make it harder for you to do the work or learn?**

### **3. Educator's role**

3.1 What kinds of things did your lecturer do to prepare you for self study? What did they do in class that helped you learn?

3.2 In which ways do you think the lecturer's actions helped you/In which ways did it make it harder for you to learn?

### **4. Peers' role**

Did your classmates play any part in your learning in the past two years?

If yes, how would you describe the part they played?

What was helpful and unhelpful to you?

5. From your experiences in this programme how would you describe?

-Knowledge

-Learning

-Teaching

6. How could

- You

- Your lecturers

- Your classmates

Use active learning strategies differently to improve the course?

Thank them for their time and participation.



6. Indicate from the list below the number of resources you used to undertake self study tasks?

Books	
Journals	
Internet	
Magazines	
Other students from the department	
Lecturers	
Experts from the field	
Own knowledge	

Other. Please specify

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### **SECTION B**

Please rate your level of agreement or disagreement with each statement by placing an "x" under the abbreviation that best reflects your opinion on the 5 point scale.

Strongly Disagree- SD Disagree – D Neutral – N Agree – A

Strongly Agree – SA

Once you have rated each statement please use the 'comment area' to further explain yourself.

		SD	D	N	A	SA
1.	I have found doing self study helpful in understanding my subjects. <b>Please Comment</b>					
2.	My lecturer gave me clear directions that helped me undertake the self study tasks. <b>Please Comment</b>					

		SD	D	N	A	SA
3.	My lecturer did activities in class that helped me learn. <b>Please Comment</b>					
4.	My peers have played a role in my self study. <b>Comment</b>					
5.	My peers have played a role in my learning during class room activities. <b>Comment</b>					

**SECTION C**

Please use the space below to explain briefly what you understand as a student in the programme by the following:

**Knowledge**

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**Learning**

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**Teaching**

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**THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME IN COMPLETING THIS QUESTIONNAIRE.  
YOUR CONTRIBUTION TO THIS STUDY IS GREATLY APPRECIATED.**

## APPENDIX 5: PERMISSION LETTER FROM THE DEAN TO CONDUCT RESEARCH



41/43 Centenary Road, Durban, 4001/ POBox 1334, Durban, 4000  
Email: [Qwele@dut.ac.za](mailto:Qwele@dut.ac.za), Telephone: (031) 2042704/3 Fax: (031)  
204 2407

27 March 2007

MRS F DEWAN  
Lecturer: Department of Child & Youth Care  
Faculty of Health Sciences  
Durban University of Technology

**RE: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN THE DEPARTMENT OF CHILD & YOUTH CARE AT THE DURBAN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY**

Dear Mrs. Dewan,

Your letter dated 19<sup>th</sup> February 2007 refers.

Please be advised that permission is granted to undertake research studies with respect to teaching and learning within the Department of Child and Youth Care at the Durban University of Technology towards your M. Ed Degree.

Please note that consent must be obtained from all participants, students and staff and that they each have a right to choose not to participate in the study.

Wishing you all the best in your studies.

Yours faithfully,



Professor S Gwele  
Executive Dean: Faculty of Health Sciences  
Durban University of Technology

## APPENDIX 6: UKZN ETHICAL CLEARANCE LETTER

RESEARCH OFFICE (GOVAN MBEKI CENTRE)  
WESTVILLE CAMPUS  
TELEPHONE NO.: 031 - 2603587  
EMAIL: [ximbap@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:ximbap@ukzn.ac.za)



UNIVERSITY OF  
KWAZULU-NATAL

14 SEPTEMBER 2007

MRS. F B DEWAN (975149124)  
ADULT & HIGHER EDUCATION

Dear Mrs. Dewan

ETHICAL CLEARANCE APPROVAL NUMBER: HSS/0551/07M

I wish to confirm that ethical clearance has been granted for the following project:

"Child and Youth Care student's perceptions of active learning strategies at the Durban University of Technology"

PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the school/department for a period of 5 years

Yours faithfully

  
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MS. PHUMELELE XIMBA RESEARCH OFFICE

cc. Faculty Research Office (Derek Buchler)  
cc. Supervisor (Frances O'Brien)