RESEARCH ARTICLE:

A Call for the Philosophising of Open, Distance E-Learning: Learning as the Art of Living in Twenty-First Century South Africa

Yolandi Marié Coetser[1] and Callum David Scott[2]

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic and its consequent "lockdowns" caused many universities across South Africa to adopt the andragogical methodology of remote teaching and learning. This move was pragmatic rather than ideological: When students and lecturers could not meet face-to-face, teaching and learning had to continue. Aside from the necessities of the Covid pandemic, there are institutions mandated to teach at a distance as their norm, so this research has the potential to be relevant to both recently hybrid and strictly distance learning universities. Our survey of the available literature directs us to a lacuna in the purely philosophical research on "distance education" and "open distance e-learning." For, whilst there exists literature that deals exclusively with the "philosophy of distance education", there is scant literature available on the "philosophy of open education", and more specifically an absence of what we deem as the "philosophy of open distance e-learning". Herein we will argue that open distance e-learning, or, ODeL, is deserving of philosophical engagement by professional philosophers. Moreover, we will contend that if this is undertaken from an Aristotelian approach, then ODeL can be imagined as directing all involved in its project to living well.

Keywords*: open; distance e-learning; Aristotle; ethics; politics*

Introduction

Learning is fundamental for survival to biological life; for example, lion cubs need to learn how to hunt, gorilla infants must come to know how to forage, and rabbit kits should master predator evasion. Knowing, the product of learning, is a foundational necessity and desire for human animals, too, even being conceived as an art (*Aristotle*, Metaphysics, I, 1), with the process of coming to know often formalised into systems of education.

The advent of the information age morphed education along with many other aspects of human life. Technological advances entail that education is accessible to those who were previously unable to access the physical spaces of education. Though not considered "formal education" in the institutional sense, Wikipedia is an example of an open education resource (OER) for learning, extant only because of technology's advancements. Many have been excluded from education because of geographical situatedness or financial constraints, but some were barred, because of their race or gender. In South Africa, for example, education was an instrument of oppression as the apartheid government segregated education, providing sub-standard education for race groups other than children of the oppressor race (Nannan, 1971: 1; Ndimande, 2013). This was founded on the realisation that the education of the masses would be dangerous for the ruling elite, as the blatant and unashamed racist parliamentarian J.N. le Roux expressed in the South African House of Assembly on 2nd April 1945 (Nannan, 1971: 2). Using racial classifications, education was stratified by that government's conceptualisation of race. Black people were educated under the Bantu Education Act of 1953 (cf. Ndimande, 2013). Similarly, the apartheid government subjugated Indian and "coloured" people in educational terms by the Indian Education Act of 1964 and the Coloured Persons Education Act of 1965 (Nannan, 1971: 3). Additionally, it is the case that "[t]raditionally, all societies have given preference to males over females when it comes to educational opportunity, and disparities in educational

[1]North-West University, yolandi.coetser@nwu.ac.za | https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8571-7590
[2]University of South Africa, scottcd@unisa.ac.za | https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5203-4320

attainment and literacy rates today reflect patterns which have been shaped by the social and education policies and practices of the past" (UNESCO, 2012: 21).

These gender disparities were reproduced in higher education (Calvo, 2018). Many people remain excluded from formal learning. However, technological evolution has allowed the mitigation of barriers, enabling more people to have access to education. Internet-based teaching and learning, open educational resources and so forth – where the educator and the learner need not be physically proximate – are examples of technology-based access tools to education. When education occurs over a temporal and physical distance, it is aptly named "distance education" ("DE"), a term sometimes used interchangeably with "open distance e-learning" ("ODeL"). The difference between "DE" and "ODeL" is not immediately apparent from the literature. In fact, there are multiple instances where "open learning" (of which ODeL is a particular variety and exemplar) and "distance education" are used synonymously (Moore and Kearsley, 2012: 3; Peters, 1998: 97). Otto Peters, however, argues that these concepts are, strictly speaking, "distinct but overlapping" (1998: 97).

From a philosophical perspective – wherein methodological composition and division for the end of greater understanding is employed (Saint Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, I, q. 85, a. 5.) – the survey of the literature directs to the assertion that there is an absence in philosophical research associated with the definitional differences around "DE" and "ODeL", and with what this distinction entails philosophically. Literature exists that deals exclusively with the "philosophy of distance education" (e.g., Katsouda *et al.,* 2024; Gava, 2014; Patterson, 2011; Gibbons, 2006; Poley and France, 1999). There have also been attempts to integrate "distance education" with "open learning" as two varieties of non-traditional classroom-type education (Maxwell, 1995: 43). This research focuses specifically on the development of the "philosophy of open, distance and e-learning". Thus, whilst we have acknowledged that there is literature available on the "philosophy of distance education", a thorough analysis thereof is not within the confines of the demarcated boundaries of this research. However, there is scant literature available – and, therefore, little research undertaken – on the "philosophy of open education" (Nyberg, 2009; Class, 2023, Sakkoula and Lionarakis, 2024), the "philosophy of open learning" (Deimann and Peters, 2016), and specifically on the "philosophy of open distance e-learning ", which would pertain to the teaching and learning andragogy of institutions assigned and committed to the task of this mode. The research published in Letseka and Roberts' (2023) edited volume on ODeL, for example although thought provoking, does not engage with philosophical considerations and conceptualisations as we intend to do in this research.

A brief methodological discussion is relevant. This study relies exclusively on literature, always from within the purely philosophical approach to research – systematic in its responses to presenting problems, but not necessarily so in its consultation of sources precisely because philosophical discourse is frequently pragmatic in its attempt to respond to a research question. This can appear haphazard to scholars from other disciplines. Nevertheless, the methodology espoused in this research can be seen as two-fold, the first approach is an integrative review of literature, and the second, is the philosophical method specifically. An integrative review is a review of literature that aims to "overview the knowledge base, to critically review and potentially re-conceptualize, and to expand on the theoretical foundation of the specific topic as it develops" (Snyder, 2019: 336). However, the field of "philosophy of open distance e-learning" does not exist in the literature, and so the purpose of an integrative review is not to reconsider positions of the past, but to produce first approximations of models (ibid.). Since this research attempts to establish the necessity of constructing a "philosophy of open distance e-learning", the second methodological approach is the philosophical method itself. While it remains difficult to define the pure philosophical method, one can broadly state that the philosopher relies on rational argumentation to advance a claim, considering opposing views and constructing counterarguments, and deconstructing and reconstructing complex concepts. In this research, the issue at hand is normatively examined, in other words, consideration concerns the *ought* rather than the *is.*

Herein it is argued that ODeL is deserving of philosophical engagement by professional philosophers. Moreover, we contend that by embarking upon this journey – through the paradigmatic philosophical lens of Aristotle – that ODeL in praxis can be a means through which people involved within it can be directed to living well. In what follows we discuss the context of "ODeL", distinguishing it from "DE". Thereafter, we examine Aristotle's views on learning, and attempt to demonstrate how "living well" can be a consequence of formal learning experiences. Finally, we explore how "the good life" is manifest in the context of twenty-first-century South Africa, and the way ODeL can further facilitate that.

The Historical and Conceptual Context of Open Distance E-Learning

"Distance education" ("DE") and "open distance e-learning" ("ODeL") are concepts that are problematically fused to the degree of synonymity. Michael G. Moore and Greg Kearsley define "distance education" ("DE") as "teaching and planned learning in which teaching normally occurs in a different place from learning, requiring communication through technologies as well as special institutional organization" (2012: 2). "Distance education", therefore, refers to those forms of learning and teaching that make greater use of communication other than immediate face-to-face teaching, but which still seek to replicate the face-to-face experience of the learner taught by the teacher (Peters, 1998: 99).

Distance education has changed significantly since its introduction in the late 1800s. Moore and Kearsley argue that there have been five generations of distance education, beginning in the late 1880s with the correspondence model (2012: 23). Due to a cost-effective postal service, students could study by receiving textbooks and tutorial material, then sending their assignments back to the institution for assessment. At this time, post allowed those who could not access traditional education models, such as women, employed people, those living in rural areas and those living with disabilities to gain entry into education (2012: 24-26). The University of South Africa embraced correspondence distance education in 1946 (2016). In the early twentieth century, broadcasting technologies such as radio and television ushered in a second generation of distance education, allowing the birth of 'schools of the air' (Moore and Kearsley, 2012: 29). These facilitated programmes and channels were dedicated to education (2012: 29-30). Believing it would corrupt, television was banned under apartheid South Africa until 1976 (The New York Times, 1964, November 10: page 1; Cros, 2014). The 1960s and 1970s were a time of critical change for distance education due to "several experiments with new ways of organizing technology and human resources, leading to new instructional techniques and new educational theorizing" (Moore and Kearsley, 2012: 31). This resulted in the 1964 to 1968 establishment of the University of Wisconsin's Articulated Instructional Media (AIM) Project and in 1967, the Open University in the United Kingdom (Moore and Kearsley, 2012: 31). This marks the third generation of distance education where various communication technologies, such as radio and television, printed study guides, recorded audiotapes, telephone conferences and correspondence tutoring, coupled with student support services like counselling, local study groups and access to university libraries and laboratories were used to provide distance education as a "total system" (2012: 32).

In the United States, the use of teleconferencing in the 1980s marked the fourth generation of distance education, which was closer to the traditional view of education as a group activity (2012: 35). Personal computers and internet-based technologies gave rise to the fifth iteration of distance education, which led to "new thinking" about DE (2012: 40-42). One must note the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on the evolution of 'distance education'. Succinctly described by Garlinska *et al*. (2023), before the COVID-19 pandemic, distance education was an option, not a necessity, for most students. Then, from March 2020, to stem the transmission of COVID-19, the lockdown was implemented in most countries, and establishments were closed, including schools. Thus, the education system adopted distance learning, actually day by day. This almost instantaneous adoption of distance learning would not have been possible had I not been for the internet. While Moore and Kearsley hold that the internet is simply an evolution of Distance Education, it has ushered in a new andragogical approach, namely, "open distance e-learning". While Moore and Kearsley hold that this development is simply an evolution of Distance Education, it has ushered in a new andragogical approach, namely, "open distance e-learning".

John Daniel, similarly, separates the concepts of "DE" and "ODeL" (Daniel in Peters, 1998: 100). The proposal is that universities that espouse the "open" andragogy, should be engaged in opening-up access to more students with geographical independence from the institution's location, enabled through methodologically flexible learning programmes (Peters, 1998: 100). Where "pedagogy" is "a child-focused teaching approach", "andragogy" is "an adult focused teaching approach" (Pappas, 2015). This research deals exclusively with the latter, within the context of institutions of higher education. In a similar vein, Peters (1998: 99) distinguishes between "distance education" and "open learning". He considers the content of their andragogy as opposed to their utility-value (ibid.). Thus, open learning brings the learning experience as near as possible to the learner, more fully conceived as a *telos* than as a systemic simulation of the classroom experience, or as in DE, of "teaching and planned learning". Here we also see the important shift from 'lecturer-centredness' in DE to 'student-centredness' in ODeL. The shift to student-centredness advocates for an increased choice in the student's education, that she be more active in her learning through doing more, and that the power differential in the relationship between lecturer and students becomes more equitable (O'Neill and McMahon, 2005: 32). It might be stating the obvious, but as Tagg holds,

"Student centered, learning centered, or learner centered ….: the learners do the learning. If they don't do it, it doesn't get done. In a sense, to speak of "student-centered learning" is a bit like referring to "food-centered eating" or "lung-centered breathing" (Tagg in Hoidn and Klemencic, 2021: 25).

In his analysis, Peters identifies eight principles that govern "open learning". He considers *equality* entailing that exclusion of anyone from knowledge acquisition is intolerable (1998: 98). Further, all students ought to be afforded equal opportunity to learning (ibid.). Next, when learning is a lifelong project, unencumbered by time and space, the principle of *lifelong and ubiquitous* learning is enabled. Moreover, the term *open curricula* imply an unfinishedness to teaching programmes, enabling openness to unforeseen developments (ibid.). Furthermore, Peters proffers that when curricula are conformed to the context and prior learning experiences of students, then *learner-relatedness* is achieved (1998: 98). When students can organise their own learning, *autonomous learning* is facilitated. Penultimately, *learning through communication and interaction* takes place when emphasis is placed on the discursive nature of learning (1998: 98). Finally, when learning takes place outside of institutions defined and often paralysed by bureaucracy, then the learning is *related to everyday life* and so kept open by engaging with the ordinary practices of living (1998: 98). Though Peters' typology is useful, we contend that there are other principles that can govern "open learning", as well as alternative ways in which to define its principles. However, "open learning", is herein conceived as *contemporary, technologically based forms of distance education delivery that utilise both temporally live and delayed modes of communication between students and academics* (Alfonso, 2012 in Arinto, 2016) (our italics). Because the communication of the curricula may occur over multiple temporal planes, this definition speaks to an *educational experience*, rather than "teaching and planned learning" (Moore and Kearsley, 2012: 2). The notion of education as experience is affirmed by Peters' understanding of lifelong learning, which bears relevance to daily life (1998: 98).

John Dewey [1859-1952] is credited with the concept of student-centred learning (O'Sullivan, 2004: 585), wherein the role of the student is emphasised in learning. In 1900, though, it was not easy to find a school where "activity on the part of the children preceded the giving of information on the part of the teacher, or where the children had some motive for demanding the information" (Dewey, 1900: 23). In his conceptualisation, Dewey distinguished between "traditional education" and "progressive education" (1986: 241, 244). Of the former he argues:

> *The main purpose or objective is to prepare the young for future responsibilities and for success in life, by means of acquisition of the organized bodies of information and prepared forms of skill which comprehend the material of instruction (1986: 241).*

However, within "progressive education", Dewey proposes that attention be paid to individual, experiential learning in the ever-developing world for the sake of self-development (1986: 244). Obviously, Dewey does not reference ODeL, but what he describes as "progressive" is akin to what we deem a "learning experience", rather than "teaching and planned learning". The notion of a *learning experience* ought to be central to ODeL andragogy, denoting a flexibility in ODeL that surpasses the possibilities that DE could birth.

This does not mean that ODeL and DE have nothing in common; both touch on the distance between learners and educators, the distance between learners, and the importance of modes of communication to mitigate distance. However, ODeL – with its "open" character – overthrows traditional classroom-type education, as is oftentimes characteristic of the model frequently mimicked by DE practitioners in "virtual classrooms". Whilst the "open" character of ODeL is central to the concept, itself, we are aware of the difficulties that stand in attempts to adequately capture it: "Open" can have numerous meanings. For instance, it can refer to open admission policies, the reduction or elimination of barriers in education, and/or openness in curricula, duration or method (Peters, 1998: 98). It could also refer to the use of "open materials", such as open educational resources and open licensing. In this paper, we do not provide an in-depth analysis of 'open', because our assumed position for the development of a "philosophy of ODeL' is for within ODeL higher education institutions specifically. However, we are aware of and do acknowledge that 'openness' could imply that learning can take place outside of formalised places of learning. No defence is made here, though, of the vagueness of the term. Additionally, ODeL places an emphasis on the electronic character of learning, which is less explicit in conceptualisations of DE. In fact, to augment this point, some distance educators conceive of DE as a "form of traditional university teaching provided through different media" (Peters, 1998: 99). But, if "open learning" is conceptualised as an experience of learning, as opposed to formalised education *only*, the andragogical focus paradigmatically shifts to *learning* in the teleological sense.

As broader, more holistic, and fundamental to the life-long journey of the human growing into evermore-tentative understandings of herself and her place within the cosmos, "learning as teleology" is an instantiation of student-centred learning. "Learning" brings about changes in knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes which can lead to permanent changes and reinforcement in an individual's pattern of acting, thinking and/or feeling (Rogers, 2003: 9). To the contrary, "education", is "[t]he systematic instruction, teaching, or training in various academic and non-academic subjects", oftentimes within an institutional setting (OED Online, 2012) and where an instructor is pivotal (Rogers, 2003: 4).

Considering these ruminations, we define as "ODeL":

> *'Open, Distance and e-Learning' is an andragogy of distance education that seeks to develop a life-long learning experience, facilitating the flourishing of the good life by learning conceived as teleological. Although the learners and educators engaged in the learning are physically and/or geographically separate, the distance is attempted to be breached by "openness" in the form of ideological and methodological flexibility, the removal of structural barriers, and the use of ICTs, especially internet-based technologies.*

Learning is construed as the "proactive and responsive engagement with our lifeworld" (Rogers, 2003: 10), directable through – among other means of the facilitation of *learning* – the andragogy of ODeL. The focus of this research is on formal, post-secondary (i.e., higher) educational institutions, as this is both the ODeL and the authors' ecosystem. However, this definition could likely be expanded to include pedagogy and heutagogy, if applied to different learning ecosystems.

Although Moore and Kearsley hold that "ODeL" – and its associated terms, such as "open education" or "open learning" – are mostly used in developed countries with elitist traditions of education, this assertion is incorrect (2012: 3). "Open, distance and e-learning" is widely employed in developing countries of Africa, where evermore people are gaining access to ICTs. ODeL thus allows for education outside of a physical classroom. On the African continent, the University of South Africa, National Open University of Nigeria, Open University of Mauritius, Open University of Sudan, Open University of Tanzania, Open University of West Africa, Zambian Open University, Zimbabwe Open University and Islamic Online University are all examples of tertiary institutions that follow an ODeL andragogy. The Covid-19 pandemic saw the bulk of universities in South Africa shifting to emergency online learning and teaching environments, among these, North West University, Stellenbosch University, Nelson Mandela University, the University of Pretoria, Walter Sisulu University, Rhodes University, the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban University of Technology, etc. ODeL pedagogy within the African continent can be partly accounted by the history of educational exclusion that continues to linger, so demanding redress. Indeed, the world's greatest numbers of children who are out of school are in sub-Saharan Africa, a rate which has seen an increase when compared to the world's total of out of school children from 32% to a staggering 51% of the world's children who are out of school (UNESCO, 2024a: 152), compounded by the region's registrations at institutions of higher learning being the world's lowest (The Africa-America Institute, 2015: 14). Nevertheless, there seems to be an upward trend, with "Africa's workforce expanding rapidly and becoming better educated (AUC/OECD, 2024). As a result, UNESCO estimates that the number of Africans completing secondary or tertiary education is expected to double between 2020 and 2040, from 103 million to 240 million (UNESCO, 2024b).

These untenable realities have bearing on moral philosophical theorising on learning, impelling argument in favour of the facilitation of learning. The significant emphasis given to education in Aristotle's philosophy can be an appropriate philosophical base for ODeL. Therefore, we now turn our attention to an Aristotelian consideration, which although conceived more than two millennia ago, bears relevance to today's ODeL context.

Aristotle's Views on Education

One of formal philosophy's most significant figures, Aristotle, wrote many works in Athens around 2300 years ago. Included among the diverse topics covered in his corpus is the nature of education. Although much of Aristotle's work on intellectual education is lost, his understanding of moral education provides an insightful way to conceptualise the *telos* – the ultimate goal – of ODeL in light of the assertion that learning is teleological. Earlier, it was argued that "learning" differs from "education"; a definitional distinction which founds the poignant differentiation between DE and ODeL. Aristotle's reference to "education" rather than "learning", could, at first glance, make his musings seem irrelevant to this research. However, it will be argued that his descriptions tend more towards our definition of "learning". In this section, an overview of Aristotle's philosophy of learning is given.

Aristotle's grasp of the learning process is bound up with his view on the state (*polis*), which he opined was the highest social institution (*Politics,* I, 1, 1252a, §1). He deemed it the *telos* of the *polis* to secure the highest good – happiness – of *man* (*Nicomachean Ethics, 1099b30*). The use of "man" here is deliberate. Aristotle's viewed women as inferior (Politics, I, 12, 1259b). For the sake of textual accuracy, the masculine pronoun is used, with an understanding and rejection of the sexism ingrained in Aristotle's thought. The place of education within the context of the state, is one of the means to develop a happy, virtuous, and intelligent citizenry (Robb, 1943: 206). Herein, education is subordinate to the state, and is provided by the state, with the educator given his duties by the state (Burnet, 1967: 5; Curren, 2010: 543). The educator's mandate is simple: educate all citizens equally in accordance with the constitution of the state (Aristotle, *Politics,* VIII, 1, 1337a, II, §2). Indeed, there is no point in a well-ordered society with well-ordered laws, if those engaging in politics have not been educated appropriately (*Politics,* V, 9, 1310a, §13). It would be disingenuous and anachronistic to argue for the same political structure that Aristotle had in mind. As such, we do not propose that the political milieu sketched here is necessary to facilitate the type of learning Aristotle discusses. Rather, the political aspects presented here serve as contextual background to Aristotle's philosophy of education.

Setting Aristotle's political philosophy aside, of vital importance to this research is the Aristotelian characterisation of education, its *telos,* and the extrapolation to ODeL andragogy. The *telos* – of education, according to Aristotle, is the attainment of happiness (Ladikos, 2010: 78), and this happiness is pursued through the educative cultivation of a certain character (Aristotle, *Politics,* VII, 13, 1332b, §13). Public education, for Aristotle, takes place in three phases (Robb, 1943: 210). For the first seven years, children ought to remain at home, and the focus should be on proper nourishment and activities of play (1943: 211). Between seven and twenty-one, formal training begins, which includes letters, bodily exercise, music and drawing (1943: 211). After twenty-one, those who have completed the public education system become citizens, and they are assigned to active service (1943: 213).

Happiness is central to the good life. Aristotle's conceptualisation of happiness is not of the fleeting kind; it is "*eudaimonia"* – translatable to "well-being" or "flourishing" – "the highest of all goods achievable by action" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 4, §§1-5). *Eudaimonia* is described as the unconditional good, or *telos*, of humans, made manifest through both the person's realisation and the exercise of virtues (Kristjánsson, 2007: 15; Robb, 1943: 206).

> *[Human good is] that for the sake of which everything else is done… [it] is the active exercise of his [sic] soul's faculties in conformity with excellence or virtue… (Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, I, 7, §§1, 15).*

Virtues are not innate, being acquired by learning (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, II, §§2-3). Happiness (or flourishing), it follows, is the consequence of processes of education (Suppes, 1996: 111).

Aristotle defines virtues as dispositions of character (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* II, 6, §15). These can be seen as relating to the goodness of intellect and the goodness of character (Robb, 1943: 207). For Aristotle, the training of the goodness of character takes precedence. True education, the training of character for the sake of goodness, is the attainment of the ability to find the mean between excess and deficient moral virtues. In Aristotle's understanding, any virtuous disposition is appropriately placed somewhere between two vices, namely, the vice of excess and the vice of deficiency (*Nicomachean Ethics,* II, 9, §1). In the preservation of the mean, virtue is to be found, but, virtue is destroyed by excess or deficiency (Ladikos, 2010: 79). Consider the virtue of great-mindedness: this is a mean between vanity (excess) and pusillanimity (deficiency) (Kristjánsson, 2007: 16). The mean is determined by the reasonable exercise of choice on the part of the moral agent (*Nicomachean Ethics,* II, 6, §15).

From this perspective, the education of citizens in virtue is the way through which people are unified into a community (Aristotle, *Politics*, III, 9, 1280b, §8; Reeve, 2003: 20-21).

> *The state…is a plurality which should be united and made into a community by education (Aristotle, Politics, II, 4).*

The Aristotelian educative process is fundamentally moral and social, that is, through interpersonal interaction, learning of great social significance occurs (Robb, 1943: 208). Precisely because education promotes civic unity and cooperation, Aristotle emphasises the shared and equal education in the virtues that should be received by all citizen-children (Aristotle, *Politics*, VIII, 1, 1337a II, §§1, 3; Curren, 2014: 84).

Moral education is multi-dimensional in its formation of people, for it draws on moral philosophy, psychology and education (Kristjánsson, 2007: 1). Moral philosophy presents the ultimate goals; psychology gives us the behavioural conditions needed to achieve these goals; and education presents the means to achieve them (ibid.). Out of its formative dynamic, Aristotelian moral education sees educators assisting in the character development of persons, as opposed to focusing on timetables and assessments (Ladikos, 2010: 82). As such, Aristotelian education intimately relates to the earlier characterisation of "learning" – as opposed to education. Indeed, the action of the teacher herein, is particularly focused upon the actualisation of the potentialities of the person of the learner (Collins, 1990: 73).

Even though Aristotle's state is distinct from any extant state, the broader argument is extractable: The good of the *community/society* is dependent upon education, since it is by education that the character of members of the community is formed. As Curren proposes, "[t]he good of the state depends upon education because it depends upon the character of its citizen, and the character of its citizens depends in turn upon education" (2000: 97). If we extrapolate this link between moral formation and learning, we infer that education, as contemporaneously defined, is too narrow to account for the moral role of *learning*.

Living Well as the *Good* of Learning in South Africa

Aristotle could surely not have imagined the modes of learning made possible by information technology. Still, we contend, *some* of his ideas remain relevant and can be suitably applied to our own 21st-century context, even to the extent of potentially improving learning. In fact, we opine, that the singular Aristotelian notion that bears merit through the ages, is the importance of human flourishing. *Eudaimonia,* a concept frequently equated to happiness, was briefly touched on above. A more contemporary interpretation of *eudaimonia* encompasses "flourishing" (Wolbert *et al.,* 2015: 119) and is equitable to "*eu zên"* (living well) (Kraut, 2022). Flourishing focuses on "optimising 'the human being qua human being'; the actualisation of human potential" (Wolbert *et al.,* 2015: 121). As the highest good, *eudaimonia* is desirable for its own sake. Further, all other goods are desirable for the sake of *eudaimonia* (Kraut, 2022). Indeed, dimensions of living that are good – health, friendship, courage, etc. – are all good for the sake of human flourishing.

In this light, we ought to consider the contemporary meaning of education, particularly in the South African context, three decades after the end of apartheid. Arguably, education is a prerequisite for living well. Certainly, many of the Aristotelian "good things" are predicated upon education. Indeed, there is empirical research that indicates how educational qualitative differences in South Africa lie at the foundation of prosperity (Moses *et al.,* 2017: 1). In this country, a small minority of learners attend schools that offer quality education enabling them to access the upper end of the labour market because they have had a higher chance of accessing tertiary education (Moses *et al.,* 2017: 2). The bulk of these schools are suburban, formerly "white" schools, with the consequence that only a black minority has access to these institutions, and so only a small handful have become upwardly mobile through the labour market (ibid.). There is a distinct correlation between the quality of education and how a learner will fair in the job market because there is a significant bond between educational investment and returns on that investment through potential salary earnings (ibid.). Since most residential universities offer only a few spaces, and ODeL institutions are able to accommodate hundreds of thousands of students, ODeL often represents the only chance for a majority of students who did not gain access to formerly "white" schools and so were 'condemned' to attend understaffed and under equipped formerly black schools. The research undertaken by Moses, et al., demonstrates that these schools "typically also suffer from poor management, little parental participation and poor assessment, produce poor cognitive outcomes, which are poorly rewarded in the labour market, resulting in low employment probabilities and low wages from unskilled occupations" (ibid.).

Additionally, whilst the technological requirements needed for ODeL to operate may be seen as a deterrent, potentially contributing to an increase in the "digital divide", ODeL institutions have found some ways around this problem. For instance, the University of South Africa places an emphasis upon its flexibility and openness, by which different "… pathways through the system…" are generated based upon students' contexts (University of South Africa, 2013). Further, Unisa has made provision to students for access to individual e-devices (University of South Africa, 2018a) and through Wifi on the university's local and international campuses and regional centres (University of South Africa, 2019). An added means of technological support for Unisa students, is the university's collaboration with South African mobile networks – CellC, MTN, Telkom and Vodacom – to grant Unisa students free data access to the University's website and to its learning management system, *myUnisa* (University of South Africa, 2018b). It is of relevance that the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa reports that the

percentage of smartphone subscriptions as a proportion of all mobile cellular subscriptions in South Africa is 68.97% (2024: 34). These devices have the potential to connect to the internet through 3G, 4G, 5G, LTE as well as Wi-Fi. Thus, although the percentage of broadband, fibre, DSL, and other sorts of internet connections in South Africa remain relatively low (2024: 43), a high proportion of South Africans access the internet through their own e-devices. This in turn makes access to ODeL learning strategies a possibility. Whilst some students may fall through the "digital divide", a blended learning approach – still extant at Unisa for first year students – does ensure that some study material will reach them by traditional postal means. In these ways, an ODeL institution, such as Unisa, makes attempts to mitigate some social inequalities.

To think practically about Aristotle's potential influence on an ODeL context, we proceed in an "ideal" way, before we expand our argument to the actual contextual reality that we find ourselves in. Once we have an ideal, we can contemplate ways in which to actualise the ideal and the role of ODeL in facilitating the ideal. Wolbert et al. contend:

> *[F]lourishing entails that, [i]deally, a human being's life will develop in such a way – and education will contribute to this development – that all her potential can be actualised, whilst creating a harmonious balance between her potentials and other goods she aims to realise and that she is happy with it too (2015: 121).*

Thus, the educative opportunity stands to direct learners to the living of their own good, that is, to a life of flourishing (Brighouse, 2006: 18). In the popular conception of contemporary capitalist society, people's ideas of good lives are often tied closely with occupations. Certainly, a majority of people want occupations that are both personally fulfilling and sufficiently lucrative that they might provide for themselves and their dependents. However, consideration of actual potential, dispositions, situational contexts, and so forth, demonstrates a more "realistic" understanding of what "flourishing" could be for any individual (Wolbert *et al.,* 2015: 121).

As the route to educational betterment for so many people, ODeL is considered in terms of the role it could potentially play in facilitating flourishing lives. After all, educational systems must have – as their principal goal – the realisation of potential excellence (Kupperman, 1987: 117-118).

Manifestations of *Good Living* through ODeL

Few people have the luxury of pursuing higher education for its own sake or for their own edification. Indeed, a majority embark on the educational journey to better their futures. In places where ODeL plays a vital role in providing access to higher education for a majority of the student populace, such as in South Africa, completing a tertiary qualification is often a prerequisite for upward social mobility. For many, ODeL-based institutions, present *the only way* to pursue learning, and thereby improve their individual and familial wellbeing. To flourish, all life-spheres must be maximised in an integrated, holistic manner (Wolbert *et al.,* 2015: 123). Thus, one cannot, say, be an outstanding accountant but neglect one's family, for, this is not a flourishing life – one has to integrate and flourish in life as a whole. For this reason, the character of education, and specifically ODeL, needs to impact upon a person's entire life. ODeL also presents a further manifestation of good living through its opening up of access to higher education to a greater number of students. As we have earlier briefly noted, in South Africa, only "white" people were given access by the state to quality education during apartheid. The rest were systematically either deprived of education or institutionally provided with sub-standard education under the Bantu (1953), Indian (1964) and Coloured Persons (1965) Education Acts. The architects of these acts adopted elements of Nazi ideology, advancing "racial purity", which entailed that black Africans were to be educated for certain forms of physical labour or menial jobs (Byrnes, 1996).

Though a non-racial school system was adopted in the 1990s, the effects of the race-based education acts can still be seen with many rural and township schools being significantly in need of basic infrastructure as well as adequately trained and dedicated educators (Nkabinde, 2016: 85). A quarter of a century after the democratic dawn upon South Africa, vast numbers of our learners are still educated in inferior schools. Entrance examinations, the requirement of high scores in matric examinations, and so forth lead these learners to compete against applicants from privileged and financially robust schools and homes. It is, thus, that the educational gate keepers of the past remain active. These realities, coupled with the people who discern the necessity of tertiary qualifications for the betterment of their lives, draw many South Africans to ODeL, for these "… institutions do not have entry barriers that traditional universities have, and as such they admit students who could not be accepted by traditional universities" (Letseka, 2016: 31). Admissions criteria, for example, may not be as restrictive, and

alternative pathways into higher education are offered (for instance via "recognition of prior learning", a programme in place at Unisa). These are facilitated because there is simply more space at ODeL institutions than at residential universities. Further, ODeL is cheaper to operate than face-to-face universities, wherein massive infrastructures require considerable, consistent financial input. Worldwide, ODeL institutions "market themselves to be affordable, accessible, open, flexible, and supportive" (Letseka, 2016: 33).

Although ODeL institutions can cater for many more students, the influx of students from disadvantaged backgrounds places a "social justice" obligation on ODeL institutions. In African countries, where higher education provision is poor, ODeL institutions are often the only feasible way of providing higher education (ibid.). As Brighouse (2006: 18) proposes, "individuals are treated unjustly if they lack substantial opportunities to live well 'as an avoidable result of the design of social institutions'". Since the point of educational opportunity is "to enable people to live good lives – happy or flourishing lives", it follows that ODeL enables the actualisation of flourishing through participation in the learning of virtues through which flourishing is expressed (Curren, 2009: 51-52). In the praxis of learning, then, the educator has a moral imperative to give space to learners to actively reflect upon, critique, and consider what the living of a good life means (2009: 52). As a precursor to flourishing for many people who come to be students in ODeL institutions, a further burden is given to ODeL institutions to be truly open. The pressure is present – as with all institutions of higher education in South Africa in light of the "Fees Must Fall" protests and campaigns that launched in October 2015 – in terms of affordability. Furthermore, ODeL institutions must be "open" by actively working to undo the closedness of education under the Apartheid regime. This means that ODeL curriculum design should ideally be done in ways that express and encourage human flourishing. Consequently, the curriculum ought to be designed so as to mitigate the poor primary and secondary education that so many ODeL students may have received. ODeL is amid to be the means by which people can enrich their lives. Moeketsi Letseka expresses this beautifully:

> *Through OD[e]L tuition and learning, students can acquire the virtues of love of truth, honesty, courage, fairness and wisdom (2016: 37).*

By conceiving education as a means to flourishing, educators must be concerned with what it means to be good, and do good. They must not just work, but must be virtuous instructors, who educate such that learning of the virtues for human flourishing can take place within their learners, in whose lives the educators are invested for the sake of flourishing (Erikson, 2016: 606).

> *Hence, goodness in teaching is not merely a matter of knowing what is good to do but of developing the courage necessary to act on that knowledge, of moving forward in right action as a teacher even when to do so runs counter to institutional imperatives (Bullough and Pinnegar, 2009: 245).*

ODeL does not only enrich individual lives. It also engenders the enrichment of the communal. An overlap, thus, is discerned between ODeL and African philosophy. In particular, we identify this point of congruence in African traditional education, within which it has been contended, lies the potential to create citizens who possess *ubuntu* (good personhood) (Letseka, 2016: 35). Since *ubuntu* is essentially about communal life, "educational thought and practice should be fundamentally concerned with educating for communal life and Ubuntu" (Taole, 2016: 67). This bears congruence with the fact that "[t]he nearly universal conviction from the advent of formal education in Africa was that it would provide a good life and develop society" (Nsamenang and Tchombe, 2011: 8). While traditional African education is centred on survival, a further aim was the creation of societal unity and consensus to "perpetuate the cultural heritage of the ethnic community and preserve its boundaries, to inculcate feelings of group supremacy and communal living and to prepare the young for adult roles and status" (Baguma and Aheisibwe, 2011: 24). Furthermore, the traditional African curriculum is not divided into disciplines, but rather integrates "skill and knowledge about all aspects of life into a single curriculum" (Gwanfogbe, 2011: 43). This system can therefore be seen as a "school of life" that aims to produce an "honest, respectable, skilled and co-operative individual who fitted into the social life of the society and enhanced its growth" (ibid.). The lines were also blurred between parent and teacher, so much so that parents, and especially mothers, were the first educators (ibid.).

Education was fundamentally social, with interactive physical training that included dancing and singing, as well as competitive games such as swimming and hunting. These activities allowed for physical development as well as the teaching of communal solidarity (2011: 43– 44). From this discussion, an overlap between the Aristotelian goal of education as a unifying the community, and the African goal of societal unity is apparent. Matshidiso Taole argues that communalism can be drawn out through distance education, as it presupposes the existence of a

community of educational practice, although the educator and learner are at a physical distance from one another (2016: 71). As a form of distance education, ODeL can, thus, potentially be seen as a "humanising pedagogy," in so far as the whole person is developed (Pitsoe and Letseka, 2016: 100).

It is interesting to note the parallels that exist between different philosophies. The identification of such being the peculiar task of intercultural philosophy. The argument made above is akin to a position espoused by the English Analytic philosopher, Bertrand Russel, who argued for the intimate coupling of formal learning to life (1926: 304). After all, living and working are always intimately coupled with the life of the human. However, whilst Russell emphasised the practical necessities of universities in training learners to be adept professionals, he also saw the need for the pursuance of knowledge "without much regard for immediate utility" (1926: 306). This research echoes his sentiment, since learning can play this dual role, as both being in preparation for a specific occupation, but also being 'learning for the sake of learning'. Indeed, by merely focusing on education, we are only fulfilling the former goal, whereas it is through learning that both are facilitated for the sake of the flourishing life of the human.

Conclusion

The primary aim of this research project has been to urge and encourage pure philosophical engagement with open distance e-learning to commence in a cursory development of the "philosophy of open distance e-learning". Pursuant to this, it has been argued that *learning*, rather than *education*, ought to be the distinguishing character of ODeL. This work can consequently be categorised as belong to a "philosophy of learning" as opposed to the sub-discipline of "philosophy of education". Through the analysis of Aristotle's philosophising on learning as a vehicle to enabling human flourishing, *eudaimonia* – happiness – has been conceived as a paradigmatic foundation from which to build an understanding of ODeL. Therefore, with the emphasis placed on the *learner* as opposed to the *educator*, it is posited that ODeL is an activity geared towards actualisation, autonomy and self-development for the sake of the flourishing of the individual, that is, as an activity leading to the *telos* of the human person.

Declarations

Interdisciplinary Scope: The article roots itself in the virtue tradition of Western Philosophy, bringing this undergirding paradigm to considerations of the theorisation of distance and e-learning learning.

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