University of Alberta

"Identity" Constructions in Online Learning Events: Gender, Subjectivities, and the Productive

Effects of Power

By

Carmen Gayle Lawlor

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Adult Education

Educational Policy Studies

Carmen Gayle Lawlor
Spring, 2013
Edmonton, Alberta

ABSTRACT

Advances in computer technology have created powerful opportunities for learners to engage

with others, producing very different contexts for learning, and for negotiating our very way of

being. Yet, engagement in these virtual learning environments also raises many questions around

how our (re)positioning within the discourses available to us, structures our understanding of

self, our social reality, and our subjectivities. In this study I embarked upon a poststructural

critique of the experiences of six women enrolled in a graduate online learning program to

explore how subject positions and subjectivities are produced, the possible enactments of self

within this context, and the ways in which these women resisted or adhered to the dominant

discourses in their individual identifications. My investigation identified four discourses that

influenced the ways in which their subjectivities were shaped, including discourses of

difference; competence; gender; and connection, conflict, and control.

Table of Contents

Figures

"Identity" Constructions in Online Learning Events: Gender, Subjectivities, and the Productive Effects of Power

CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM AND SIGNIFICANCE

Any viable online education must be sufficiently flexible to foreground the sociopolitical underpinnings of technological knowledge, to underwrite the complexities of ethical pedagogies, and to acknowledge its unavoidable double character as both revealing and concealing. Online education reveals and conceals the world in many ways. (Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2005)

The use of computer technology in adult and higher education has generated a unique learning space that can support and maintain interactions with others on a global scale, introducing a context which has altered not only our way of thinking and of engaging with others, but also our very identities (Haraway, 1991; Turkle, 1995; Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2005). Within this context, however, the way our subjectivities influence learning is not well understood (McConnell, 2002); although the significance of particular historical, social, and institutional influences on identity construction have been widely acknowledged (Hall, 1996; St. Pierre, 2000; Wenger, 1998). These poststructural critiques of learning, identity, and subjectivity highlight the importance of intersecting systems of oppression and privilege, like gender, race, class, and sexual orientation, that influence our constructions of self; how our subjectivities are defined and redefined within this context; and acknowledge that in the stories that we tell about ourselves and our experiences, certain aspects that do not fit within the dominant narratives, are silenced or excluded (Tisdell, 1998; Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2005). A poststructural understanding of self

sees the self as something that is "always becoming, not given" (Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2005, p. 63), thus the opportunity exists for interacting among various discourses in the online space, maintaining multiple connections, and creating the possibility of resisting certain subject positions in constituted experiences that privilege a dominant class (St. Pierre, 2000).

Gender is an important lens through which this experience needs to be understood, given the significance of this social reality on the structuring of our world, our constructions of self, and our learning. Liberation from what we consider and recognize as "women's experience" calls for the construction of a new consciousness, and of new possibilities (Haraway, 1991). Foucault's (1980; 1995/1977; 1983a; 1990/1978; 1994) influential works, and those of many poststructural writers like Haraway (1991), raise awareness and highlight the importance of gender and other intersecting systems of oppression and privilege that influence our experience, and that speak to how things have evolved in particular ways; yet, these productions, while appearing intelligible, are not essential nor necessary, and different possibilities can be imagined (Foucault, 1994). Much of the past research on gender and online learning has focused on the barriers and limited access that women experience in distance education, on gender based differences in communication style on and offline (Fahy, 2002; Tannen, 1995), and on reports that these differences in communication style differentially influence learning experiences and the effectiveness of these learning experiences (Rovai & Baker, 2005). This research has also shown that online communications are not equally accessible and that men may have greater influence in these discussions (Herring, 2000). However, what this research does not tell us is how dominant discourses function in this online context; how certain individuals come to be powerful and others powerless; and how we are (re)constituted within particular discourses, obliged to take up certain subject positions within their limits, which in turn structures our

subjectivities. To address these issues, this research will focus on the experiences of six women who are studying within an online learning context. In considering their experience through a poststructural lens, my aim is to gain a greater awareness of how their subjectivities are constituted, how discourse functions, and how they adhered to or resisted particular discursive practices within their experience.

Coming to the Research Question

These questions intrigued me because I have had the opportunity to look at the experience and processes involved in online communications both as a student engaged in these discussions, and as a researcher observing the interactions of others. As a student, at times I felt somewhat ill at ease with the nature of this communication and in my ability to lead discussions, yet convinced that discussion in a virtual context holds great promise for educational endeavors. These online discussions provided many valuable opportunities to gain awareness of and appreciation for different views, and to enhance my own understanding. While I found a great sense of accomplishment and satisfaction throughout the process, I also found elements of online discussion challenging. Crafting individual postings was a laborious and time consuming task that involved not only careful consideration of specific word and grammar usage, given the formality of interactions in this space, it also raised personal questions about my own writing identity, how my subjectivities were (re)constituted, and how I was positioned within these learning events. Perhaps not surprisingly, I found there is an inherent risk involved when interacting in these learning contexts. The nature of the learning objectives often required debate and provided a forum for challenging ideas, although the act of being challenged in such an open and permanent forum raised feelings of doubt, uncertainty, and a sense that some measure of

credibility was lost. The very public nature, formality, and permanence of these types of discussions create a very different context for learning than face to face experiences, and raised very interesting questions about the development of identities and subjectivities within this space, the negotiation of particular ways of being, and of the ways in which we are recognized within these spaces.

As a researcher I had the opportunity to study the interactions that happened in moderated online learning events as they related to gender and the gender composition of the group. Here I found evidence of gendered communication styles and purposes of interacting and of greater male participation (Lawlor, 2006). This research left many unanswered questions that highlight the very complex nature of these communications, and of issues of identity negotiation and of positioning and privilege within these discussions. Questions that these experiences have raised for me include: What "rules" govern online behavior? What influences the choices individuals make when deciding how to interact with others, who to interact with, and in what manner to interact? How do online interactions influence learning and subjectivity; and how are positions negotiated within discussions and within lived experiences online? Why? As Tisdell (1998) argues, we do not all enter the educational arena on even terms for "some of us have been listened to more, validated more, and have had our contributions privileged more than others have, in both overt and covert ways" (para. 29). Tisdell's observations raise very important questions about the experiences of learning, of rules that govern our behavior, and of the possible enactments of self that are available to particular individuals.

Research Question

A poststructural critique of the online education arena calls for an exploration of how particular discursive practices within this context confine and define the subject positions that are available to certain individuals; how positioning is negotiated; how subjectivity is constructed; how these discourses have evolved in ways that make them intelligible; and also what are new possibilities for understanding these events? To address these questions and limitations of past research, the focus of this study is to gain a greater understanding of how discourse functions in an online learning context, how women construct their subjectivities, and how they adhere to, and/or resist particular cultural discourses that confine or define their possible subject positions. The research questions that guided this work are as follows:

1) How does discourse function in these online learning events?

2) How do particular discursive practices lead women to understand themselves/others online? How are these discursive practices negotiated?

3) How do dominant discourses shape learning experiences within these contexts?

4) How do women adhere to, and/or resist particular cultural discourses within their experience?

5) How did my own subjectivity influence and inform the understandings constructed in this research endeavor?

This research considered the gendered experience of online learning and the discursive practices that lead the women in this study to understand themselves and others in particular ways. The literature review that follows introduces ideas surrounding poststructuralist thought that inform this research, and addresses how identity and gender identity have come to be understood, the type of gender research that has been conducted in online learning contexts, along with descriptions of interaction within online learning events, and studies of identity development online.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Internet and advancements in communication technologies have changed the way we think; how we live; and how distances -- geographical, cultural, linguistic, and social -- can be crossed in our efforts to connect with others (Turkle, 1995; Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2005). These changes have created the possibility of introducing new contexts for learning and for constructing identities, besides raising many important questions surrounding how the self and subjectivity are defined in this context. Following is a brief discussion of the evolution of poststructural feminist pedagogy, with an ensuing discussion of identity, the influence of gender on identity construction, and current understandings of gender; and a consideration of how connecting with others and learning have come to be understood in virtual contexts.

Poststructural Feminist Pedagogies

Poststructural feminist pedagogies have grown in response to criticisms of humanistic claims of the nature of reality (St Pierre, 2000), to beliefs about the shortcomings of both the psychological and structural models of feminist pedagogy, and have overlapping influences with both critical pedagogy and multicultural education (Tisdell, 1998). Following is a brief discussion of the psychological and structural models of feminist pedagogy that have had an important role to play in the evolution and development of poststructural feminist thought.

Psychological Models

Psychological feminist pedagogy focuses on the creation of environments that allow women to become constructors of knowledge, and that highlights connection and relationship in learning (Flannery & Hayes, 2000; Tisdell, 1998; 2000). These feminists challenge the silencing of women's experiences and women's knowledge, and focus on attempts at understanding the differences between men and women. As a means of understanding these differences, these feminists utilize constructs like gender role socialization. The work of Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) in *Women's Ways of Knowing*, is a well-known example of research that utilizes this psychological perspective. Using the experiences of women, this research aimed to explain, legitimate, and validate women's ways of knowing. From this work, five categories of women's ways of knowing were outlined: "*silence*, a position in which women experience themselves as mindless and voiceless and subject to the whims of external authority; *received knowledge*, a perspective from which women perceive of themselves as capable of receiving, even reproducing, knowledge from the all-knowing external authorities but not capable of creating knowledge on their own; *subjective knowledge*, a perspective from which truth and knowledge are perceived of as personal, private, and subjectively known or intuited; *procedural knowledge*, a position in which women are invested in learning and applying objective procedures for obtaining and communicating knowledge; and *constructed knowledge*, a position in which women view all knowledge as contextual, experience themselves as creators of knowledge and value both subjective and objective strategies for knowing" (Belenky et al., 1996 p.15). Important findings included the significance of voice in women's

descriptions of self and its relation to both intellectual and ethical development, and an acknowledgement of women's predisposition to connection with others (Belenky et al., 1996).

Psychological feminist theories are concerned with the psychological emancipation of women, although they have been criticized for the lack of attention paid to structural systems of power, privilege, and oppression. In terms of education, the focus of psychological feminist theories is on the creation of equal opportunities for women, although this focus lacks a critique of the structural systems that created these inequitable opportunities and that oppress women (Flannery & Hayes, 2000).

Structural Models

Structural models consider and critique the structural systems of power, privilege and oppression that psychological models ignore. A prominent and influential proponent of this philosophical framework is Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator. Freire's work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1971), argues that education represents an important vehicle for social change and for liberation. Freire's pedagogy has two distinct stages:

> In the first, the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation. In the second stage, in which reality of oppression has already been transformed, this pedagogy ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all people in the process of permanent liberation. (p. 36)

Freire believes that without a critical consciousness of the forces that shape their lives, the oppressed are powerless to change the status quo. Thus, the role of adult education is to engage in dialogue with learners to bring about this critical consciousness through a confrontation of both the consciousness of the oppressed as well as the consciousness of the oppressor. This calls for a critical and liberating dialogue with the oppressed, that is carried out at the stage and level

of awareness that the oppressed perceive reality, and that involves their reflective participation. As Freire (171) cautions, "attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects which must be saved from a burning building; it is to lead them into the populist pitfall and transform them into masses which can be manipulated" (p. 47).

Structural models of feminist pedagogy have been influenced by the work of Freire (1971), although they go past Freire's focus on class to consider other structural forms of oppression and privilege based on differences like gender, class, race and sexual orientation (Flannery & Hayes, 2000; Tisdell, 1988). The primary focus is on working toward structural change rather than individual change, and on highlighting how structural power relations influence learning, knowledge production, and the determination of what is considered "official" knowledge. Criticisms of this approach center around the inattention paid to individual learning, psychological safety, and individual ability to effect change (Flannery & Hayes, 2000; Tisdell, 1998).

Poststructural Models

Poststructural feminist pedagogies have grown in response to perceived lapses within the psychological and structural models and to criticisms of the nature of power, and privilege; and of the nature of reality. Poststructuralism foregrounds issues of positionality and difference, and, unlike structural models, poststructural models acknowledge the existence of multiple and intersecting systems of power, privilege and oppression. Four themes of poststructural feminist thought that are of particular relevance to adult education are outlined by Tisdell (1998) including belief in: 1) the intersection of different forms of oppression and

privilege, (2) multiple truths, (3) an emphasis on deconstructing categories, and (4) the existence of shifting and fluid identities.

First is the notion that there exists an intersection with gender and other systems of oppression and privilege like race, class, and sexual orientation. Of importance here is how these intersecting systems influence the construction of identity, and how the intersection between the individual and these systems of privilege and oppression affect knowledge construction, individual experiences and interactions in the learning environment (Tisdell, 1998). Second, poststructuralists question the belief in the existence of one single truth. Third, poststructuralists problematize and deconstruct categories and binary opposites like man-woman, rationality-affectivity, and human-technology. For instance, a deconstruction of the rational-affective domain recognizes that the affective domain bears rational aspects and the rational domain also carries affective aspects. Of significance is the connection between these domains and how our affect or feelings influence what we believe rationally about the world (Tisdell, 1998). Fourth, is the tenet that one's individual identity is fluid, or constantly shifting. This perspective considers how identity is influenced by other social realities like gender, race, class, ableness, or sexual orientation (Flannery, 2000), but also recognizes the possibility of multiple identities within different contexts, and the possibility of constructing and choosing one's identity (Tisdell, 1998). A poststructuralist understanding of identity acknowledges the ongoing influence of both the individual and the social on its construction, where identity is seen as a temporary point of identification, constituted within particular discursive practices, and through relations of power. This understanding lies in contrast to more static notions of identity that see individual identifications as stable expressions, unaffected by the outside world (St. Pierre,

2000). What is germane here is how one's individual and perpetually shifting identity intersects with social structures and their concomitant effect on one's positionality within the classroom.

Poststructural feminists foreground this notion of positionality within the classroom for instructors and learners, and consider its influence on learning and the learning environment, as they recognize that learners do not all enter the learning arena on equal footing (Tisdell, 1998). Given a poststructural view of individuals that supports a belief in the socially constructed nature of subjects, a call for social interaction in computer supported collaborative learning contexts raises many questions and potential tensions around learning events, where issues related to identity hold great significance. This poststructural understanding of identity, and its rejection of the belief in a unified, essential being, sees individual subjectivities as a site of contradiction, conflict, and reconstitution, and as a process of continual change. Consequently, how our subjectivities are shaped in educational contexts becomes an important question that calls for a critique into the ways in which the production, use, influence, and sanctioning of computer supported learning events may contribute to social inequities, and that can define and limit possibilities and potential enactments of self (Anderson & Damarin, 1996; Breustle, 2009; Yeaman, 1996). Following is a more comprehensive discussion of identity that considers how identity has come to be understood, of how different philosophical perspectives influence this understanding, and of the importance of gender in its construction.

Identity

"Identity is the interface between the individual and the world, defining as it does what the individual will stand for and be recognized as" (Josselson, cited in Flannery, 2000). There is, however, little consensus surrounding current understandings of identity development.

How one views this process is dependent upon the philosophical perspective one adopts. From a psychological perspective, identity formation is seen as an internal process where identity is understood as stable and constant. This essentialist view attempts to seek the "truth" about the nature of identity, and carries the assumption that there is a set of characteristics common to all individuals that do not change in any significant way. A sociological view sees the primacy of the external influences of the social world on identity development. In other words, identity can be seen as the way people understand, position, and distinguish themselves from others (Flannery, 2000).

Poststructuralists, on the other hand, take a non-essentialist view, recognizing the possibility of multiple identities and the possibility of changing identities within different contexts. This perspective considers the social construction of identity and subjectivity to be influenced by other social realities like gender, race, class, and sexual orientation (Flannery, 2000). Personal agency is also a significant characteristic from a nonessentialist perspective for it is believed that "identity can be both constructed and chosen" (Flannery, 2000, p. 58). An understanding of social forces that influence individual interpretations and identity development is critical to a non-essentialist focus. Hall (1996) provides a very useful definition and discussion of identity that takes this poststructural stance.

A Definition by Hall

Hall (1996) recognizes the shifting nature of identity and the interplay between the individual and the social. Hall (1996) offers the following description of identity: it is "the meeting point, the point of suture, between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to 'interpellate', speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular

discourses, and on the other hand the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us

as subjects which can be 'spoken'" (p. 5-6). An identity then is the temporary connection to a

particular subject position that is constructed through discursive practices. Because identities are

created from within, not outside, of these discursive practices, they need to be understood as

constructions within particular historical, social, and institutional sites that are produced through

relations of power. Hall (1996) argues that identity is more a construction of difference and of

how one is positioned in relation to the other. In this sense, identity works as a point of

identification because of its ability to exclude, oppress, or keep out certain individuals. Identity is

constructed through difference and through the functioning of power and exclusion (Hall, 1996).

Derrida's work illustrates this process of exclusion in identity constitution that establishes a

polarity or marked distinction between two identifications. This is illustrated in the creation of

categories man/woman or black/white for instance, where the second terms lack the essentiality

of the first. Hall (1996) argues that the term 'woman' is "reduced to the function of an accident",

while "white is equivalent to 'human being'" (p. 5). "'Woman' and 'black' are thus 'marks' (i.e.

marked terms) in contrast to the unmarked terms of 'man' and 'white'" (Laclau, cited in Hall,

1996, p. 5). The construction of these categories and identification with particular categories

serves to privilege some while disadvantaging others, and plays a significant role in our

understanding of self and in our learning. Hall's (1996) understanding of identity positions the

functioning of power as a central, productive force in the creation of identity where difference

and exclusion play important roles in the construction of particular subject positions.

Like Hall's (1996) conception of identity, poststructural beliefs of identity see the

subject as an ongoing construction created through relations of power (St. Pierre, 2000). For

poststructuralists, important questions to consider are: "who gets to be a subject in a particular

discourse, in a particular set of practices? Who is allowed a subject position and who is not? And

to ask the other part of that question, who is subjected?" (St.Pierre, 2000, p. 503). Poststructural

beliefs of the subject stem from a critique of humanistic claims of the nature of the individual as

a stable, rational, autonomous being where words and actions are seen to be an expression of an

identity, and where the self has its own intrinsic integrity, untouched and unencumbered by the

outside world. In poststructuralism, identities are viewed as unstable, where subject positions and

subjectivities are continually constituted within particular discursive practices that embody

different positions of power (St.Pierre, 2000). As Walkerdine (1990) explains, "individuals

constituted as subjects and objects within a particular framework, are produced by that process

into relations of power. An individual can become powerful or powerless depending on the terms

in which his/her subjectivity is constituted" (as cited in St.Pierre, 2000, p. 503). Feminists argue

that this process of constituting the subject privileges men over women and that gender

represents one important way in which identity and subjectivity need to be understood, although,

like identity, there also exists little consensus surrounding current understandings of the

construct gender.

Gender Identity

I see gender as a social construct that relates to the manner in which discourses

and practices are created and instantiated by society, based on biological differences of sex

(Ferris, 1996; Yates, 1997). The lack of consensus in the literature on how to define and locate

this construct will be explored in a later section; although it is important here to underscore the

significance of gender, gender roles, and gender stereotypes in the creation of our self-concept,

our subjectivity, and in determining the way in which we interact with the environment and with others (Slavkin, 2005).

Gender Roles and Stereotypes

From childhood, gender roles help to determine the decisions we make about how to interact with others, to classify behaviors, and to choose friends (Slavkin, 2001). Assumptions about gender held by parents and teachers, like "all girls like to stay clean and all boys like to get dirty" (Reynolds, 2004, p. 28), can also impose structures that dictate acceptable and allowable behavior, and limit what children can learn from particular activities (Reynolds, 2004). Gender stereotypes can be understood as the attribution of particular personality traits as either male or female, and are associated with notions of gender roles (Krueger, Hasman, Acevedo, & Vilano, 2003).

Research has shown that male and female children are treated differently, and that they are encouraged to participate in activities and behaviors that fit with societal prescripts of appropriate masculine and feminine behaviors (Flannery, 2000). Girls are taught to be "nurturers, caregivers, peacemakers, model mothers and wives, and sexual seducers. Boys, by contrast, are taught to be strong, to master tasks, to be competitive, to be breadwinners, to keep feelings buried, and to be sexually assertive" (p. 64). The socialization of gender roles creates differential beliefs about individual capability and competence. Race, culture and class also intersect with gender influences. Even within the same social context, ethnicity makes a difference. In a study of the self image of school age children, Flannery (2000) reports that white girls tend to have a positive self-image and sense of competence in elementary school, although in high school their self-image is often characterized as poor. For Hispanic girls, the decrease in self-esteem in high

school is even more pronounced, although black girls maintain their levels of self-esteem. For

boys, high beliefs of competence and capability continue throughout high school (Flannery,

2000).

A study conducted by Nichols (2002) found that the interpretive gender

frameworks of parents influenced the development of literacy for girls and boys differently.

> Picture a family room in a middle class home somewhere in the suburbs of a city in the
> West. Over the kitchen countertop the parent observes two young children sitting side by
> side on the sofa looking at a picture book together. Suddenly one child gets up, runs to a
> ball that is lying on the ground and starts bouncing it enthusiastically on the wooden floor.
> The other child scarcely looks up, absorbed in the book. (Nichols, 2002, p. 123-124)

How do we interpret this scene? Do we assume that the young child who gets up from the couch

to play with the ball is male, and that the child who remains absorbed in the book is female?

How does the parent interpret this event? Nichols (2002) argues that parents continuously

interpret the actions of their children, but that they do so with thought and awareness of how

others will judge the appropriateness of their child's behavior, and also their own competence

and success as a parent.

In schools, officially sanctioned behavior for girls is defined by stereotypes that

describe them as well mannered, passive and neat (McLaren, 1989). Krueger et al. (2003)

identify specific traits that can be characterized as either masculine or feminine. Feminine traits

include those characteristics that are affectionate, gentle, sensitive, sympathetic and

understanding. Masculine traits include those behaviors that are aggressive, forceful, defend

beliefs, show leadership ability, and take a stand (p. 114).

Gendered stereotypes operate as a normative function through the simplification

of descriptions of masculine and feminine that then prescribe behaviors and attitudes that are

acceptable to, and approved of by society (Camussi & Leccardi, 2005). Masculine and feminine

stereotypes also carry with them differential positions of status. Stereotypes associated with

femininity and masculinity do not originate from biological differences, but from the roles of

males and females within the social context, where male roles are afforded higher status than

female roles (Camussi & Leccardi, 2005). Decisions about 'good' and 'bad' behavior become

defined though stereotypic expectations. Camussi and Leccardi (2005) argue that these gender

expectations function as social stereotypes. These expectations inform perception and belief of

different male and female traits, and they perform a normative role through the identification of

desirable traits for males and females. How we act is linked to our perceptions of the value

society places on certain behaviors that are aligned with expected or traditional ways of acting in

the world and are also embodied in the language, communication, and interactions of a particular

culture (Slavkin, 2001). While researchers agree that gender plays a critical role in identity

development, a generally accepted way of characterizing gender is elusive.

Defining Gender

Early researchers saw gender as a bipolar construct where individuals could locate

themselves at some point along a continuum between masculine and feminine. This theory of

gender has been challenged and revisited by subsequent researchers, like Bem (1974), who see

gender as a dualistic construct where individuals can possess traits of both masculine and

feminine identities, and more recently by researchers who are taking a multifactorial focus to

understand gender (Ashmore, 1990; Athenstaedt, 2003; Oswald & Lindstedt, 2006). Following

is a more detailed look at Bem's gender schema theory.

Bem's Gender Schema Theory

Bem (1974) submits that masculinity and femininity are not bipolar ends of a single continuum, but rather dualistic, in that individuals may be both masculine and feminine, or, as she labels them, psychologically androgynous. In addition, her findings suggest that those individuals who are highly sex-typed exhibit specific inclinations to conform to societal prescriptions of sex-typed appropriate behavior. In this study, Bem (1974) developed a sex-role inventory, The Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI), composed of two separate scales for masculinity and femininity. She saw these as independent dimensions that allowed for the possibility of characterizing an individual as masculine, feminine, or androgynous. Each scale consists of 20 personality characteristics that typify sex-typed socially desirable qualities for males and females.

Bem (1974) proposed this gender schema theory to make sense of gendered identities and self-concepts. Here she defines a schema as "a cognitive structure, a network of associations that organizes and guides an individual's perception (and) functions as an anticipatory structure, a readiness to search for and to assimilate incoming information in schema-relevant terms" (Bem, 1981, p. 355). Perception in this process is constructive and is a product of the interaction between incoming stimuli and a pre-existing schema for understanding and imposing structure on incoming stimuli. Bem's gender schema theory posits that "the phenomenon of sex typing derives in part from gender based schematic processing, from a generalized readiness to process information on the basis of sex-linked associations that constitute the gender schema" (Bem, 1981, p. 354). Of note is the suggestion that one's self-concept is incorporated into the gender schema. Sex typing here is understood as the process

through which a society creates masculine and feminine from male and female. This process of sex typing is central to many theories of development that offer explanations for how children learn appropriate behaviors and how individual identity is developed (Bem, 1981). Children learn society's gender schema and consequently the sex-appropriate characteristics that are applied to their own sex, and thus to their own self. However, this is not a simplistic process where boys and girls learn which attributes are to be applied to each sex, such as that girls are weak and boys are strong. Rather, what is learned is that the dimensions or attributes themselves are differentially adoptable. For instance, the strong dimension is missing from the gender schema for girls, and likewise for boys the schema for nurturance is absent. To illustrate, Bem (1981) argues that it is rare for boys to be labeled nurturing, or for girls to be strong, although a readiness exists that allows for sex-appropriate typing. Thus, children learn selectivity in the appropriation of potential schematic dimensions for describing self and for developing a self-concept. "Thus do self-concepts become sex typed, and thus do the two sexes become, in their own eyes, not only different in degree but different in kind" (Bem, 1981, p. 355). So too are personal behaviors, inclinations, and attitudes judged against this internalized gender schema. In this way, individuals regulate their own behavior in accordance with society's beliefs of what it is to be male or female. It is a theory of process rather than of content. Individuals process information through the lens of a particular gender schema (Bem, 1981).

Bem's (1993) more recent work on gender and gender identity offers a more interpretive look at these constructs that considers historical, cultural, and institutional influences on the reproduction of male privilege. Beliefs about the natural superiority and dominance of the male sex over the female sex have been prevalent and enduring underpinnings throughout Western culture's history. Even with transformations in the social consciousness following

feminist advocacy for women's rights in the mid-nineteenth century, and the work of feminists in the 1960's to raise awareness and expose "sexism" in policies and practices of everyday life, hidden assumptions about sex and gender continue to pervade the consciousness and the discourses and social institutions that reproduce male power (Bem, 1993). Bem (1993) identifies three of these hidden assumptions; termed the "lenses of gender", including: the lens of androcentrism, the lens of gender polarization, and the lens of biological essentialism.

The first lens, androcentrism, cultivates the notion of male-centeredness that sets the definition and experience of males as the standard or norm, and that of females as a deviation from that standard. "It is not that man is treated as superior and woman as inferior, but that man is treated as human and woman as 'other'" (Bem, 1993, p. 2). The lens of gender polarization is an insidious perception of the fundamental difference between men and women that acts as an organizing principle in the social world, dictating every aspect of human experience including: manner of dress, social roles, and the experience and expression of emotion and sexual desire. And lastly, the third lens, biological essentialism, works to both rationalize and legitimize the first two lenses through the belief in the natural and inescapable consequence of biological difference between men and women. While not denying this biological difference, Bem (1993) argues that "these facts have no fixed meaning independent of the way a culture interprets and uses them, nor any social implications independent of their historical and contemporary context" (p. 3). Bem (1993) introduces an important caveat here, for not all men are endowed with this power and privilege. Historically it has been the white, heterosexual and wealthy males who have wielded power and who have created the cultural discourses and social institutions that support their privilege. In Bem's (1993) expansion of her gender schema theory, consideration is given to these gender lenses. She argues that because society is gender polarizing and

androcentric, males and females within society become androcentric and gender polarizing themselves, thus contributing , even unwittingly so, to the reproduction of male privilege.

Multifactorial Gender Theories

More recent research on gender has moved beyond a focus on masculinity and femininity as a defining determinant of gender, to multifactorial theories that suggest gender identity is composed of a multitude of gender stereotypes and that what it means to be masculine or feminine differs widely amongst individuals (Oswald & Lindstedt, 2006). As an example, Athenstaedt (2003) sees the gender-related self as a "multifactorial structure and that the gender role self-concept is an important and distinctive factor of the gender-related self" (p. 309). The gender related self can be understood as an "intersection in memory between the representation of gender-related knowledge and the self" (p. 309). The multifactorial nature of this theory comes in response to criticisms that past research like that of Bem (1974) uses measures of the BSRI and other inventories as sole indicators of gender related selves. These limited views of gender focus on expressive and instrumental measures while ignoring other domains that intertwine with a gender-related self. Ashmore (1990) shares this complex view of gender, and of the gender-related self that takes into account the influence of a wide array of gender-related domains. Ashmore (1990) submits that:

gender identity is an individual's structured set of gender-related personal identities. Personal identities are . . . links between the individual's self and biological/physical/material factors, interests and abilities, relationships with specific other people, social categories and dimensions of affect and personality, and styles of behavior. (cited in Athenstaedt, 2006, p. 310)

Athenstaedt's (2006) study explores the structure of gender role self-concept using a conceptualization that introduces feminine and masculine behaviors, and socially

undesirable gender attributes along with more common measures of expressive and instrumental traits. This exploration examined three possible models of gender role self-concept that used this conceptualization. The first structure, based on early assumptions of a unidimensional understanding of gender, subsumed all six components outlined. The second structure was modeled after Bem's (1974) conception of two independent dimensions, male and female. Structure three theorizes that the undesirable gender traits for males and females are independent factors, and that undesirable female traits correlate negatively with femininity, and undesirable male traits correlate negatively with masculinity. This third model also suggests that socially desirable instrumental and expressive traits correlate with their same gendered factors, masculinity and femininity. Study findings did not support the first two modes presented, however they did support model three. Although similar to model two, and Bem's conception of two independent dimensions, model three is more complex with an added independent dimension between gender and socially undesirable expressive and instrumental traits. Findings indicate that highly feminine individuals attribute low numbers of undesirable instrumental traits to themselves and highly masculine individuals attribute low numbers of undesirable expressive traits. Results also showed that the feminine and masculine dimensions were independent for men, yet positively correlated for women. This, Athenstaedt suggests, may be a representation of the higher value society bestows upon male characteristics, thus compelling women to include certain male attributes into their self-concept. Alternatively, this result may suggest a tendency for women to describe themselves in socially desirable ways. For men, social desirability appears not to hold the same importance. Also, for men a positive correlation between masculine and undesirable masculine traits suggests that masculine men are willing to characterize themselves with socially undesirable attributes.

This research is but one part of a larger body of research that points to the importance of gender in the development of a self-concept and identity, and also the very complex nature and multitude of contributing domains in our gender related self (Athenstaedt, 2003). However, as Yoder and Kahn (2003) caution, superficial gender comparisons can lead to beliefs that sex or gender lie at the root of difference. They call for researchers to "think beyond superficial descriptions of difference and to consider more often the impact of the social context in which these differences occur" (p.281).

Poststructural feminists have contributed a significant body of work that uncovers the ways in which social and cultural values shape meanings and practice, and that highlights the significance of considering gender as an issue in educational research. More importantly, poststructural feminists have taken up the task of asking different questions, and of critiquing the ways in which the foundations of humanism have oppressed many people who are on the disadvantaged side of its subject/object binaries: "male/female, white/black, rich/poor, heterosexual/homosexual, healthy/ill, and so on" (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000, p. 5). In turn these researchers have produced alternative discourses, epistemologies, and ways of thinking about, and conducting research. However, how one names one's feminism has been highly contested (Haraway, 1991; St. Pierre, 2000), and has led to confusion, disagreement, and fragmentation where in naming the reality of exclusion can lead to essentializing beliefs of identity. "With the hard won recognition of their social and historical constitution, gender, race and class cannot provide the basis for belief in 'essential unity'. There is nothing about being 'female' that naturally binds women" (Haraway, 1991, p. 155). Haraway (1991) describes gender, race, and class as a consciousness forced upon us by a history where patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism reigned. So, even the concept 'woman' holds certain dominations where some women

hold more power. As an illustration, Haraway (1991) identifies "women of color", as a distinction left out of the categories of "women" or "blacks" that, while oppressed, hold greater privilege than "women of color". The category "woman" excludes all women who are not white, while "black" excludes all people who are not black. Through their exclusion, and categorization as "women of color", these women are defined by their negation.

Flannery and Hayes (2000) argue that "inattention to gender is linked to broader philosophical stances in adult learning theory that assumes the universal relevance and applicability of dominant learning theories to all adult learning settings and participants" (p. 5). In many respects, the significance of gender has largely been ignored in much educational research. The focus of this project is to address this gap in educational research, and to look anew at the gendered experience of learning in virtual contexts, using a poststructural lens. The review that follows addresses the type of gender research that has been conducted in online learning contexts.

Gender Research in Online Contexts

Early research on gender and online education focused on issues related to greater male representation online and the barriers and limited access to higher education and access to computer technology experienced by women (Moffatt, 1997). More recent research has shown evidence that these imbalances are a disappearing problem (Gunn, 2003). However, while female participation in post-secondary education has shown dramatic increases over the last 30 years, equaling and often surpassing that of the male populace, female representation in technology and computer science studies continues to lag behind that of males (Burtch, 2005). Additional studies of online communications however, have also shown that gendered interactions online can create

additional barriers to equitable participation (Herring, 2000; Yates, 1997). Research on communications online has also shown greater participation rates for males (Herring, 2000; Ferris, 1996; Barrett & Lally, 1999), and found that males have greater control over topics of discussion. While women 'speak' online, there is evidence to suggest that their contributions are often ignored (Herring, 1996; Ferris, 1996). Not all research, however, supports these claims. Fahy (2002) found relatively equal participation rates for males and females, although his study did find gendered styles of communication online.

Gender research has also shown that males and females can also differ in terms of conversational purpose in communications online. These differences, described by Gilligan, (1982) highlight

> The wish [of men] to be alone at the top, and the consequent fear that others will get too close: the wish [of women] to be at the centre of connection and the consequent fear of being too far out on the edge. These disparate fears of being stranded and being caught give rise to different portrayals of achievement and affiliation, leading to different modes of action and different ways of assessing the consequences of choice. (p. 62)

This desire for women to find connection with others in the course of their learning experiences has also been reported elsewhere (Faith, 1988; Kirkup & VonPrummer, 1990). However, there are studies that also suggest that, for some women, solitary study is preferred and high levels of interaction are neither desired nor needed (Kramarae, 2001; Wall, 2004).

Past research has also suggested that talk in the context of higher education is at odds with the typical or preferred communication style of some women (Hayes, 2000). Where traditional academic talk in formal education takes on a form that is more consistent with "report talk", an approach that can be characterized as "ritual opposition", Tannen (1994) has found the conversational styles of women to be more aligned with "rapport talk" that is focused on creating and maintaining relationships. Many women find that communications as "ritual opposition" are

not conducive to their learning. "What is perceived as an attack on their thinking can make these people doubt their own ability and stifle their thinking rather than enhance it" (Hayes, 2000, p. 84). Not all women will respond the same way to this type of talk; for some women this academic style of discourse has been adopted very successfully, yet for others this style of talk can lead to a desire not to participate. Similar differences in conversational style in online communications were also identified by Herring (1996), with expository interaction favored by men and an epistolary interaction favored by women. These gendered styles of online interaction, identified by Herring (1996) in her study of two unmoderated listservs, revealed a more epistolary type of interaction used by women, distinguished by communications with a more interactional character that acted to sustain further communications. In contrast, an expository style of communicating was favored by men, characterized by discourse that was more declamatory or one-sided. This style of communication shows overriding attempts to convey information that often exhibits elements of a classic scientific essay where a problem is identified, a solution proposed, evidence is given to support the solution and criteria supplied with which to evaluate the argument. Support for this finding can also be found in subsequent online studies (Fahy, 2002; Ferris, 1996; Lawlor, 2006). In 2006, I reported evidence of gender related discursive practices, gendered differences in purposes for interacting in online forums, along with findings of greater male participation. While much research supports findings of gendered differences in communication, reports of greater male participation are not consistent. Fahy (2002) found relatively equal rates of participation for men and women in his online research.

Unlike Herring's (1996) study of an unmoderated listserv, studies like those of Fahy (2002) and Lawlor (2006), which have explored interactions and communication styles in

moderated forums, have found less extreme forms of expository interaction. This result supports

arguments of less extreme types of behavior produced in moderated forums (Savicki,

Lingenfelter & Kelley, 1996).

More recent research on gender in online learning contexts has reported very few

differences between men and women. Cuadrado-Garcia, Ruiz-Molina, and Montoro-Pons (2010)

conducted an interdisciplinary project at the London School of Economics (LSE) and the

University of Valencia (UV) to examine values, attitudes, and beliefs of students engaged in

virtual learning activities. The students were required to complete a profile questionnaire and to

introduce themselves to other participants in their targeted group. Other tasks included written

reports, presentations, and individual research projects. The UV group was composed of 14

males and 10 females, while the LSE group included 6 males and 17 females. Results showed

high levels of participation from both the UV and LSE groups which the researchers suggest

indicated a high degree of interest in the assigned activities. Gender differences were only

observed across a few variables, including greater involvement and higher grades for female

students, and reports from male students that class activities interfered with social activities.

Notwithstanding, satisfaction with the learning environment was high for both males and

females. A few gender differences, however, existed within this survey variable for satisfaction.

Specifically, male students composed longer posts for their online contributions, and required

more help using the online software, whereas female students did not report problems using this

technology (Cuadrado-Garcia et al, 2010). Bruestle et al.'s (2009) research also suggests little or

no significant gender differences exist in the actual engagement and acceptance of online

learning. For both men and women it appears that the Internet and online learning technology

have become an integral part of life. However, when it comes to self-assessment of competencies

and skills in online learning contexts, results showed significant gender effects. The women in this study portrayed a tendency to assess their personal competencies using computer technology as low compared to their male counterparts, which belied their actual usage and skill. Bruestle et al. suggest that these contradictory results may reflect patriarchal discourses and stereotypes around gender and technology that sees technological skill and competency as male, and the lack of these qualities as female. This research highlights the very complex nature of gender construction and its influence on learning, and of the influence of virtual environments on these constructions.

Online learning environments have generated new and complex ways in which we experience learning and how we define and redefine ourselves. Turkle (1995) argues that the Internet has introduced a unique context where the possibility of connecting with millions of people in a virtual space has changed how we think, how we connect with others and create communities, and has reconstructed our very identities and subjectivities. The Internet and our connections in cyberspace have become a routine mainstay, essential to our everyday lives, where our participation with others can become quite intimate even without physical contact. Constructing identities in these virtual spaces happens within a broader cultural context that is seeing an erosion of the boundary that exists between "real" and virtual, animate and inanimate (Turkle, 1995).

> On the one hand we insist that we are different from machines because we have emotions, bodies and a intellect that cannot be captured in rules, but on the other we play with computer programs that we think of as alive or almost alive. (Turkle, 1995, p. 177)

How we experience and create our identities has undergone a fundamental shift. Turkle (1995) cites as evidence advances in scientific research, and concomitant attempts to create artificial life, along with records that show individuals taking up multiple personae in a variety of different

virtual contexts. However, what is unclear is how does participation within virtual contexts influence identity and subjectivity construction online, and how are dominant discourses either resisted or adhered to within this space? In the ensuing sections, I will discuss current understandings of participation and interaction, and of learning in online contexts, along with a body of research that informs these understandings.

Interaction

Online education serves as a space where learners can construct multiple identities in a complex learning environment that can support interaction on a global scale. The Internet has introduced an era where individuals can connect distances that are not only geographical, but distances that are also linguistic, social, and cultural and this opportunity raises questions about how the self and how subjectivity are defined and redefined in this context in light of a poststructural notion of identity that sees the self as something that "is always becoming, not given" (Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2005, p. 63). In this virtual context, possibilities exist for weaving among various discourses, maintaining multiple connections with others, and supporting a hybrid or nomadic identity. Zembylas and Vrasidas (2005) argue that this possibility creates a completely unique educational landscape. "A hybrid or a nomad is not rooted in an ordered space and time, does not comprise a fixed identity, but instead rides difference. He or she knows no boundaries and wanders across diverse spaces" (Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2005, p. 63). This conception challenges humanist thought and its belief in a fixed identity, for the Internet and its hypertextual nature allow for extensive and complex linking between different textual, visual, and or auditory material in the exploration and construction of new knowledge.

Haraway (1991) describes hybrids as creatures composed of mixed elements; a compound of both organism and machine; a cyborg. She writes about the possibilities of a cyborg feminism as a response to humanistic claims, by Euro-American feminists and their deeply troubling assumptions of master narratives that are rooted in racism and colonialism. These cyborgs are composed of particular types of organisms and machines that are unique to, and suited for the later twentieth century. They are, as Haraway (1991) explains, entities of a post Second World War that are made of two essential constituents,

> ourselves and other organic creatures in our unchosen 'high-technological' guise as information systems, texts, and ergonomically controlling, laboring, desiring, and reproducing systems. The second essential ingredient in cyborgs is machines in their guise, also, as communication systems, texts, and self-acting, ergonomically designed apparatuses. (p. 1)

She sees these cyborgs, and women, as "boundary creatures" who have an important part to play in destabilizing western notions of evolution, technology, biology, and their concomitant narratives. As a cybernetic organism, the cyborg is both a production of social reality and of fiction. Our lived social relations, and our social reality as a political construction is also fiction. What we consider and recognize as "women's experience" is a construction of both fiction and fact, of the most serious, political kind, and where liberation relies on a construction of awareness, an imaginative unease that at once recognizes domination and oppression, but also possibility. "The boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion…it is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality" (Haraway, 1991, p. 149-150). A cyborg is a creature without gender, and without an origin story set within a western humanist context, and so is not committed to relationships for creating a whole from parts, out of which difference, hierarchy, and dominance operate (Haraway, 1991). For Haraway (1991), a hybrid or

cyborg identity opens up the possibility for resistance; for creating identities that are not gendered, nor committed to the status quo.

Identities and discourses are constantly shifting, and while a hybrid or cyborg identity can create possibilities for resistance and for challenging dominant narratives, Zembylas and Vrasidas (2005) caution, "to the extent that the Internet, dependent on hardware and technological tools provided by multinational corporations, is a factor in the proliferation of identities and realities, then one has to admit that the hybrid self is partly complicit in the processes of commercial and technological globalization" (p. 63). While online education programs can offer educative possibilities to those individuals who cannot access residential face-face education, concerns exist surrounding not only the lack of representation of underprivileged individuals, but also a lack of understanding of the potential that exists for creating educational and social inequities in regional or global contexts. Rye and Stokken (2012) argue that although the Internet is seeing increasing and widespread access to a global network of knowledge, and educational opportunities; the influence of the local context of students' lives can impose barriers to equitable participation. This research suggests that individual conditions, obligations, and social relations play an important role in student performance; and that being a student goes beyond affiliation with an educational institution and access to external learning resources, to also include how this connection to an educational system interacts with other considerations within the social world of students. How individuals balance the materiality of their lives; their personal and work related obligations and activities around their obligations and goals as students is an important consideration in online education. In these contexts it is important to recognize that "we may act together, but individuals' resources available for action vary widely" (Rye & Stokken, 2012, p. 192), and that through participation issues of equity and

power become significant. Therefore it is important to acknowledge that, although the World Wide Web offers opportunities in terms of providing access to many people and to many ideas, it can also act to include or exclude certain people, ideas, or events (Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2005). "Using technological tools in online education (such as asynchronous discussion, chat rooms, and links to Web sites) simultaneously reveals some things while concealing others. It draws attention to particular people, events, and ideas, and it ignores or excludes others" (Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2005, p. 65).

Considerable consensus surrounds the support for claims of the importance of, and potential benefits of interaction for learning within computer mediated contexts (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001). However, this agreement also raises many questions such as, what is meant by interaction, is it uniformly beneficial, how does this interaction in a virtual context lead us to understand ourselves and others, and what is the relationship between interaction and learning in computer supported contexts? (Thorpe, 2006).

Defining Interaction

The Merriam Webster dictionary defines interaction as "mutual or reciprocal action or influence" (p. 372). In an educational context, one definition that has found favor with researchers is proposed by Wagner (1994) who argues that "interactions are reciprocal events that require at least two objects and two actions. Interactions occur when these objects mutually influence one another" (cited in Godwin, 2005, p. 4). This broad definition has found approval with some researchers for it does not restrict its meaning to certain types of interaction (Anderson, 2003), and it closely resembles the definition provided by reference works where reciprocal or mutual influence are highlighted (Godwin, 2005). In Wagner's definition of

interaction there is a distinction made between interaction and interactivity, where interactivity is seen as a characteristic of the system for instructional delivery. Wagner's model of interaction was derived from a communication model created by Shannon and Weaver in 1949. Godwin's (2005) evaluation of the notions of interaction and interactivity within computer mediated contexts adopts this definition proposed by Wagner (1994), although here interactivity is seen as "a property of the system where interaction is occurring" (p.4). For example, high interactivity is seen as a condition where there are high levels of interaction taking place. What is meant by interaction and interactivity within computer mediated learning contexts assumes a wide range of meanings and attributes associated with it in the educational literature (Godwin, 2005). Some definitions for example, like that provided by Garrison et al. (2000), give context bound explanations where interaction is seen as sustained two-way communication that happens between two or more persons. Interactivity has also been described as the actual quality of a particular communication where this "quality (potential) may be realized by some, or remain an unfulfilled option for others" (Gunwardena & Zittle, 1997, p. 3-4).

Modes of Interaction

Interaction within an educational context has also been conceptualized as occurring within different modes. Moore (1989) identified interaction as happening at a minimum within three modes -- learner-content, learner-instructor, and learner-learner -- that have been foundational to many conceptualizations and frameworks for understanding interactions in education contexts. Moore (1989) sees learner-content interaction as a defining characteristic of education for, as he describes it, "without it there cannot be education, since it is the process of intellectually interacting with content that results in changes in the learner's

understanding, the learner's perspective, or the cognitive structures of the learner's mind" (para. 4). This type of interaction, Moore (1989) believes, coincides with what Holmberg (1986) calls "internal didactic conversation", or self-talk that relates to content, or to information or concepts that the learner encounters. Learner-instructor interaction is the interaction that happens between a learner and a content expert. Here he sees the value in the opportunity that instructors have for responding to the application of new knowledge acquired by learners, for this is a point of vulnerability for self-directed learners, or learners who are studying independently with content. Moore (1989) argues that students in isolation "do not know enough about the subject to be sure that they are (1) applying it correctly, (2) applying it as intensively or extensively as possible or desirable, or (3), aware of all the potential areas of application" (para. 10). The final form of interaction, learner-learner, is a dimension of interaction that became possible in distance education with the introduction of audioconferencing, and with advances and developments in computer technology, new contexts for learning have been created that can support this type of interaction, and have thus transformed both the thinking and practice of distance education from the 1990s to the present time. Like learner-instructor interaction, Moore (1989) argues that the interaction amongst learners has great value at the point of applying and evaluating newly acquired knowledge.

Hillman, Willis, and Gunwardena (1994) added an additional mode of interaction to Moore's conceptualization that they termed learner/interface interaction. This form of interaction they defined as the "process of manipulating tools to accomplish a task" (p.34). Learner/interface interaction considers issues related to access, skills, and attitudes required to communicate in mediated modes of interaction, like that in a virtual context. While this form of

interaction is not a separate form of interaction, it can be understood as a component of the other modes when they occur in a mediated context.

Anderson and Garrison (1998) furthered this discussion with their inclusion of three additional forms of interaction: teacher-teacher, teacher-content, and content-content. With the emergence of multimedia networking capabilities, the opportunity for teacher-teacher interaction has blossomed. It is this form of interaction that Anderson (2003a; 2003b) argues is critical for distance educators to engage in if they are to take advantage of recent developments in their discipline area and with distance education pedagogy. Anderson (2003b) asserts that "this interaction between and among teachers forms the basis of the learning community within formal education institutions" (p. 139). As well, it is this form of interaction that presents valuable opportunities to gain information and insight from colleagues about technical and pedagogical issues. Teacher-content interaction considers the role that teachers play in the development and application of content objects. Anderson (2003b) argues that this role will become increasingly important in the future for both distance and classroom based educators. Content-content interaction refers to the interaction that happens between intelligent agents or programs. These intelligent programs "differ from conventional software in that they are long-lived, semi-autonomous proactive, and adaptive (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, cited in Anderson, 2003a, p.15). Examples of intelligent agents interacting are Internet search engines that communicate with one another to search for information, sending these results to central databases. Intelligent programs have already been written that possess the ability to not only perform information retrieval, but also operation of other programs, decision making, and monitoring functions. Anderson (2003b) argues that "in the near future teachers will create and

use learning resources that continuously improve themselves through their interaction with other intelligent agents" (p.139).

Other modes of interaction have also been considered in the literature including learner-self interaction and teacher-self interaction (Hirumi, 2002), although a discussion of interaction modes and the actors involved in these interactions is not complete without mention of the interaction with the broader environment and social context in which education takes place. The interactions that happen with students and teachers, their communities, families, and workplaces, can have a dramatic influence on the context of formal educational situations. Burnham and Walden (1997) describe this type of interaction as learner-environment which they define as "a reciprocal action or mutual influence between a learner and a learner's surroundings that either assists or hinders learning" (p. 4). These complex interactions reflect broader societal norms and expectations that relate to gender, race, class, and other social distinctions (Anderson, 2003a), and hold great significance for the experience of learning, and for negotiating our ways of being in educational contexts.

This discussion lends great insight into the types and range of interactions that are possible in virtual learning contexts, although Paz Dennen and Paulus (2005) argue that, while participation may be significant for creating a sense of community among learners that is important for learning, "it does not in and of itself lead to collaborative knowledge building through dialogue" (para 10). Following is a more detailed look at current understandings of learning in virtual contexts.

Online Learning

Core Elements of a Successful Learning Experience

Three core elements of a successful educational experience frequently cited in the education literature include: cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence. It is assumed that through the interaction of these three key elements within a community of instructors and students, learning occurs (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Figure 1 is an illustration of a model encompassing these three elements that has provided a framework for the study of computer conferencing in higher education.

Figure 1. Community of Inquiry Framework

Community of Inquiry

Supporting Discourse

SOCIAL PRESENCE

COGNITIVE PRESENCE

EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE

Setting Climate

Selecting Content

TEACHING PRESENCE (Structure/Process)

Communication Medium
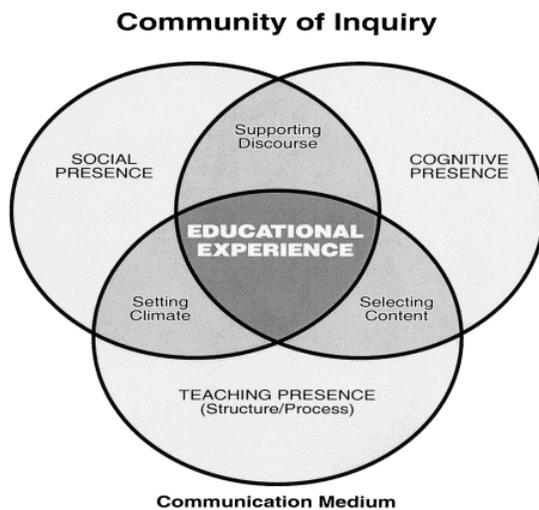
(Garrison et al. 2000, p. 2.)

The practical inquiry model of cognitive presence emphasizes experience and includes four phases of practical inquiry or critical thinking. In this process, similar to a report form of communication, inquiry begins with a triggering event that asks questions and

recognizes the problem; followed by the exploration phase involving brainstorming and information exchange; integration, involving synthesis, connecting ideas and information; and finally resolution where solutions are tested and defended in the real world (Garrison et al., 2000). Categories for social presence identified by Garrison et al include: emotional expression, open communication, and group cohesion, that contribute to an overall sense of group cohesiveness, a sense of belonging, and sustained relationships. "Teaching presence is essential in balancing cognitive and social issues consistent with intended educational outcomes" (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 24). Three categories of teaching presence identified by Garrison et al. are: instructional management, involving design, and planning concerns for the educational experience; building understanding, including processes involved in attaining consensus and understanding amongst learners; and direct instruction, involving the assessment of communications and of the educational experience.

Following from this discussion and conceptual work, tools to identify specific indicators for the three elements of a Community of Inquiry were developed. These tools have been utilized in a number of research studies that have examined cognitive presence (Garrison, et al., 2001; McKlin, Harmon, Evans, & Jones, 2002; Meyer, 2003), social presence (Hillman, 1999; Rourke & Anderson, 2000; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 2004; Ubon & Kimble, n.d.), and teaching presence (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001). These positivist studies examined text-based computer conferencing corpora to determine the presence or absence of specific indicators of cognitive, social, and teacher presence.

Studies of Cognitive, Social, and Teaching Presence

    A scarce and inconsistent body of knowledge shows higher ordered learning outcomes within text-based computer conferencing (Kanuka, 2005; Kanuka & Garrison, 2004). However, past research has shown very little evidence of discourse moving to higher levels of thinking in computer supported contexts (Bullen, 1998; Garrison et al., 2001; Kanuka & Anderson, 1998; McLean, 2005), although it is unclear whether these results are due to the lack of critical thinking, to the way critical thinking indicators are assessed online, or to our ways of thinking about collaboration and knowledge construction in online environments.

    Studies of social presence support the sociable nature of computer conferencing and its ability to foster interpersonal interaction (Rourke & Anderson, 2000; Kanuka & Anderson, 1998), to facilitate trust amongst participants thus reducing anxiety (Hillman, 1999), and to increase student satisfaction with online learning experiences (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997). One concern raised by Garrison (2006) is that social presence research has not considered either cognitive or teaching presence. At issue is the intersection between social and cognitive presence and the need for social presence to move beyond mere establishment of socio-emotional presence. Garrison here argues that social presence in a Community of Inquiry "must create personal but purposeful relationships. What is required is a clear understanding of how social presence shifts to support the educational objective of the community" (para. 7).

    Research on indicators of teaching presence has shown marked variability across research sites for indicators of this core element (Anderson et al, 2001), although these researchers see important applications for this tool as a diagnostic instrument for instructors to assess and compare their own teaching practice. Issues that surround research on teaching

presence involve concerns with construct validity and the distinction made between different indicators for this element (Garrison, 2006).

The community of inquiry framework continues to exert great influence over both educational research and practice worldwide, although a growing body of research critiquing this framework has emerged (Oztok & Brett, 2011; Xin, 2012). This research argues that the three key components, cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence, do not adequately reflect the "messiness", complexity, or multi-functionality of online discussion, and that a focus on the relationships among these three elements requires attention. Xin (2012) argues that each of these elements represents a particular function within the communication process, rather than discrete components, and thus requires an analysis that attends to the context and the flow of conversation.

Paz Dennen and Paulus (2005) call for more contextualized research on collaborative knowledge building in formal online learning events. Much past research has not provided information about context, and has relied mainly on coding and frequency counts of conferencing transcripts. They argue that "an ongoing lack of attention to a coherent theoretical foundation, examining transcripts without attending to their situated contexts, and relying primarily on reductionist content analyses methods, will continue to limit our understanding of the potentiality and actuality of online collaborative learning environments" (para. 1). What these positivist studies do not tell us is, what is it that we are learning? Who decides? Using a poststructural lens, these and other important questions arise, including: Who is privileged and who is not within these interactions? How does discourse function and how do particular discursive practices within this context lead us to understand ourselves and others?

Studies of Identity Development Online

Another scarce body of research considers identity construction and negotiation in online learning contexts. Following is a discussion of some of the research that considers this issue.

Harvey's (2009) research focuses on the development of instructor identity in web-based learning, and questions whether this identity construction follows the same path as the development of student identity. This progression is characterized by initial feelings of anonymity along with a sense of disidentification. Walker (2003) defines disidentification as "a split between a person's activities and their relations with participation, a rupture between what a person is actually doing, and how a person finds themselves located in the community" (p. 57). Harvey's work suggests that there is a sense of anonymity for students that can create a 'safe' space for discourse and a sense of empowerment for students. This sense of empowerment, she argues, is a result of the opportunity students hold for determining the extent of their self-disclosure, and for the construction of new identities. Harvey (2009) also argues that learners experienced increased confidence and freedom to challenge instructors and debate ideas. She does caution, however, that identities are not entirely anonymous, as student names can provide information about gender, race, or nationality. As well, introductory activities designed to let students "get to know" each other can create an environment where self-disclosure is expected, and where writing quality and writing style can also convey a "writer's identity", which can in turn suggest a social identity. As Harvey (2009) writes, "Personal anonymity and the ability to create an online identity appear to have an empowering and positive influence on student's learning, but the impact of a community might be the larger factor in contributing to a student's sense of belonging, motivation, and success in online learning" (p. 4). Harvey (2009) argues that

possessing a sense of belonging to the online community helps students develop online identities

and reduces feelings of isolation. I would argue, however, that participants in online learning

communities are not as anonymous as Harvey suggests. The importance of community for the

success of online learners has been well documented in the educational literature (Conrad, 2005,

Garrison et al., 2001; Gundawardena & Zittle, 1997; Swan, 2002), although a clear

understanding of community remains elusive (Conrad, 2005). The confusion in the literature

surrounding community lies with the term itself, and the fact that it is often used synonymously

with other terms like "community of inquiry" (Garrison et al, 2001), "learning community", and

"community of practice" (Wenger, 1998), or is used in combination with ideas about

collaboration, as something that can be built, or as a somewhat elusive "sense" that can be

developed (Conrad, 2005). Historical definitions of community have utilized distinct place-based

characterizations with rural connotations (Conrad, 2005), although, with the emergence of virtual

communications, our understandings of community have also changed. As Garton,

Haythornwaite, and Wellman (1997) argue, community can be "maintained through ties rather

than through geographical proximity" (p. 6).

In another online study of identity development, McConnell (2002) explored three

online learning groups and the influence newly constructed identities had on community

development. Through learners' interaction and collaborative work, McConnell found that

identity was created and re-created with respect to five variables: "themselves as learners, their

purpose as learners, their relationship with tutors, their place in the academic world, and their

professional practice" (para. 60). As learners, identity development is influenced by the

identification of self as a member of this community, through their writing for their community

of peers, through an understanding and recognition of the expertise of others, through judgments

made of their own work as well as that of others, and through the realization that they are

capable of producing knowledge. Their purpose as learners influenced identity through the

requirements for participation and collaboration within this learning event, and through the

reflection of this learning. In this learning context, learners were also asked to assume certain

traditional roles of tutors such as the assessment of self, and the assessment of others. In

addition, the development of a relationship with their tutor challenged more traditional roles as

they were encouraged to view the tutor as a peer and to challenge or debate ideas with the tutor.

Where participants saw their place in the academic world also influenced their identity

development as collaborative group activity challenged, for some, their ideas of what scholarship

and learning meant and how it is accomplished. In terms of their professional practice, learners

were challenged to manage and negotiate an identity as a student alongside their identity as a

professional. All five of these variables influenced learners' ideas of themselves and their

identities within the different communities in which they were involved. McConnell (2002)

summarizes this process thusly: "The ways in which they experience themselves through

participation helps them to define who they are" (McConnell, 2002, para 61).

Early research in online learning also argued that virtual learning contexts

provided a sense of anonymity and safety in class discussions that was viewed as liberating,

given the lack of visual cues that could provide information related to gender, race, age, and

socio-economic status (Harvey, 2009). Researchers believed that this 'anonymity' allowed

learners the freedom to choose what, and how much they were willing to disclose, and allowed

opportunities to construct new identities (Blake, 2000). More recent research has shown evidence

that online classrooms are not entirely anonymous, although, research on anonymity in online

learning contexts continues to produce mixed results. Cornelius, Gordon, and Harris (2009;

2011) argue that learning environments using asynchronous role play activities can create opportunities for all learners to have an equal voice, and have resulted in generally positive attitudes toward anonymity. They suggest that anonymity in learning events can encourage increased honesty, openness, and willingness to share, along with a reduction in stereotyping and bias. In these online studies, however, a wide range of responses was reported, with judgments ranging from "confident" to "panic". While some respondents felt the activity allowed them to "loosen inhibitions", others showed diverging degrees of commitment, and concerted efforts to identify the identities of others. Some identities were also revealed through individual "voice", suggesting that genuine anonymity is unattainable. Blake (2000) argues that names may also give clues as to one's gender, race, or nationality; and discursive styles and humor, slang or grammar usage may suggest a "social identity" (Blake, 2000). In Blake's (2000) discussion of identity development, the notions of a writer's identity, and an academic identity are highlighted. He argues that although participants have opportunities to construct individual writer and academic identities and can choose to present themselves in particular ways "it would be naive to expect that this veiling is ever likely to be completely successful" (p. 191). Through our use of language, particular social identities emerge, and although participants may consciously construct a writer identity, "it can also be unconsciously betrayed" (p. 192). In terms of academic identities, Blake (2000) argues that writing can reveal more than just an academic voice and that "writing invariably portrays fractured identities and multiple voices" (p. 193). But, more importantly, a poststructuralist critique of online learning contexts acknowledges the existence of multiple and intersecting systems of power and privilege that influence identity construction. We enter educational contexts from particular subject positions that are constructed within discursive practices and through relations of power (Hall, 1996); our identities shape the

most fundamental aspects of our learning experience, where we position ourselves, how we act, whom we choose to interact with, and what we attend to (Wenger, 1998). As Haraway (1991) explains, "what counts as experience is never prior to the particular social occasions, the discourses and other practices through which experience becomes articulated in itself and able to be articulated with other accounts, enabling the construction of an account of collective experience… 'women's experience' does not pre-exist as a kind of prior resource, ready simply to be appropriated into one or another description" (p. 113).

Past research on gender, interaction, and learning in virtual learning contexts has primarily focused on the examination of quantitative gender differences, on reports of participation, satisfaction, learning outcomes, and evidence of critical thinking, however, how gender is constructed in these online learning events, and the implications of these constructions are largely unexamined. Many interesting questions remain, surrounding the experience of learning, and of negotiating who we are, and who we are recognized as within these communications. As a response to these lapses in educational research, my research will investigate the gendered nature of experience and its influence on learning, and consider the functioning of discourse and discursive practices that lead women to understand themselves and others in particular ways. The following section will discuss the specifics of the research approach taken for this investigation.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH APPROACH

For this doctoral dissertation, a qualitative research approach was taken; working within a poststructural paradigm, an exploration of women learners' experiences with online learning events was considered. The purpose of this work was to develop an understanding of the ways in which discourse functions in an online learning context, how it is negotiated, how gender shapes the learning experiences within these contexts, and how women adhere to or resist dominant narratives within their experience. Following is a discussion of the methodology that guided my research, including attention to qualitative research, and poststructural thought, along with specifics related to the data collection, analysis and evaluation undertaken in this investigation.

Qualitative Research Characteristics

The field of inquiry that is broadly known as qualitative research has a complex history and includes many assumptions, ideas and concepts associated with a number of different traditions including: "foundationalism, positivism, postfoundationalism, postpositivism, and poststructuralism" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p.2), and includes corresponding research perspectives or methods that are part of this interpretive work. While qualitative research has held different meanings throughout its history, and within its differing traditions, Denzin and Lincoln (1994) offer this generic definition for this form of research:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive material practices that make the world visible. These practices

transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (p. 3)

Merriam (1998) defines qualitative research as an "umbrella concept covering several forms of inquiry that help us understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible" (p. 5). This approach to research is distinguishable from positivistic forms of research where knowledge is acquired through objective, experimental and scientific inquiry, and where results are quantifiable and reality is understood as stable, measurable, and observable. Merriam (1998) outlines several characteristics of all qualitative research that help to clarify important elements of this form of inquiry. First, the key concern of qualitative inquiry is to gain a greater understanding of the phenomenon from the perspective of the participant. This insider perspective, or 'emic', is in contrast to the 'etic', or outsider view. A second characteristic involves the role of the researcher as the primary instrument for collecting and analyzing data. The researcher as an instrument can be differentiated from other forms of data collection instruments for

the researcher is responsive to the context; he or she can adapt techniques to the circumstances; the total context can be considered; what is known about the situation can be expanded through sensitivity to nonverbal aspects; the researcher can process data immediately, can clarify and summarize as the study evolves, and can explore anomalous responses. (Merriam, 1998, p. 7)

Thirdly, qualitative research typically involves some form of fieldwork. For this research project, the fieldwork consisted of telephone interviews with participants rather than a more traditional approach where the researcher goes physically to people or sites in a natural setting. Fourthly, strategies employed are primarily of an inductive nature with a focus on

building abstractions, concepts, or hypotheses and theories. And lastly, the focus of qualitative research is on "process, meaning, and understanding" (Merriam, 1998, p.8) that produces a rich and descriptive analysis. One additional attribute common to some forms of qualitative research is the possibility of an emergent and flexible design that can respond to changing conditions as the study progresses. As previously noted, qualitative research is an umbrella term that embraces different variations or typologies. While each of these variations hold unique and distinguishable attributes, they all share the essential qualities of qualitative research described here (Merriam, 1998). Qualitative research is interpretive and thus guided by the researcher's beliefs and understandings of the world. The interpretive paradigm that guided my qualitative research was a poststructural one.

Poststructural Paradigm

A paradigm, according to Guba and Lincoln (1994, 2005) can be understood as a

set of basic beliefs (or metaphysics) that deals with ultimates or first principles. It represents a world view that defines for its holder the nature of the 'world', the individual's place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts, as, for example, cosmologies and theologies do. (p. 106)

The belief system that one holds influences questions that are asked, the interpretations that are made, and it carries certain ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions. Following is a more detailed discussion of poststructuralism, the belief system that has informed this work.

Philosophical Concepts of Poststructuralism

Poststructural thought is a response to humanist claims of the nature of truth, reality, knowledge, and identity. Flax (1990) outlines a number of key themes of humanist thought that have been rejected by poststructuralists, namely that "language is in some sense transparent; that there is a stable, coherent self; that reason and its *science* - philosophy – can provide an objective, reliable, and universal foundation of knowledge; that knowledge, which is acquired from the correct use of reason, will be *true*; that by grounding claims to authority in reason, the conflicts between truth, knowledge, and power can be overcome; and that freedom consists of obedience to laws that conform to the necessary results of the right use of reason" (cited in St.Pierre, 2000, p. 480).

One important way of describing both humanism, and poststructuralism, the historical response to humanism, is to look at their functioning in society. This is not a simplistic task, for humanism and its effects have become so naturalized within our culture and society that it is difficult to see it. As St. Pierre (2000) describes it "humanism is the air we breathe, the language we speak, the shape of the homes we live in, the relations we are able to have with others, the politics we practice, the map that locates us on the earth, the futures we imagine, the limits of our pleasures. Humanism is everywhere, overwhelming in its totality" (p. 478). Perhaps equally difficult is the task of describing poststructuralism and its functioning, for, as a response to humanism, it cannot escape it. Humanism is always implicated in the critiques made by poststructuralist work. Poststructuralism calls for critiques of any situation or process as a means of looking at these events in a different way, or to see new possibilities from what was once

considered "natural". Foucault (1994) explains that this requires exploration of how things have evolved in ways that are historically intelligible, but not essential. "We must make the intelligible appear against a backdrop of emptiness and deny its necessity. We must think that what exists is far from filling all spaces. To make a truly unavoidable challenge of the question: What can be played?" (Foucault, 1994, p. 139-140).

Using a poststructural lens, a critique of an online educational context and the constructed experiences within this context were explored. Questions surrounding the subject and the range of subject positions that are available to certain individuals were an important element in how this project was conceived and carried out, and where, within a deconstruction of the subject, an understanding and analysis of the workings of discourse, power, the production of knowledge, and reason was instrumental to its investigation. These themes; language; discourse; reason; power, resistance and freedom; knowledge and truth; the subject; and subjectivity also represent a useful way for describing poststructuralism and its response to humanistic claims of the nature of reality, and it is where this discussion now leads.

Language

Humanists see language as a system that enables identification and correspondences to be made between words and things that exist in the world. To simplify the process of naming all the different things there are, similar things, people, and ideas are grouped into categories, even though distinct differences exist among things that have been grouped in a particular way. For example, as people are placed into gender categories, differences within other identity categories, like race and class, are ignored in attempts to produce organization and order (St. Pierre, 2000). The process of creating these categories calls for the need to define not only

the essence of things but also the essence of the categories in which these things are subsumed. This process and the ultimate pursuit of identity, however, "privileges identity over difference" (St.Pierre, 2000, p.480), and has been used to create binaries and classification systems that are believed to represent the innate nature of the world. Feminists argue that the construction of these binaries privileges men over women and that woman are typically on the bottom of binary hierarchies. As an example, St Pierre (2000) argues that the first term in binaries like "culture/nature, mind/body, rational/irrational, subject/object are male and privileged and the second terms are female and disadvantaged" (p. 481). A focus on identity using only one identity category, like gender for instance, erases other types of difference that exist within the category woman, and creates the opportunity to assign people in specific hierarchies that can then be manipulated and oppressed, thus producing order.

Poststructural critiques of language trouble the notion that language accurately reflects the world, or that there is any correspondence between words or texts and the ideas or things that they are representing (Scott, 1988). Poststructuralism posits that the "meaning of the signified is never fixed once and for all but is constantly deferred" (St.Pierre, 2000, p.481). Derrida's (1974/1967) work, *grammatology,* is an important contribution to poststructuralist critiques of language. Derrida introduces the notion of différance to illustrate how the meaning of language can change as social contexts change, and thus meaning can always be debated. Meaning then is something that is temporary and fleeting (St.Pierre, 2000).

The analysis of language in poststructural critique is a critical entry point for understanding the workings of social relations and their production. By attending to language and the processes involved in the creation of categories and of meaning, new ways of interpreting the world are opened (Scott, 1988). The important questions to be asked in such a

critique are, "in what specific contexts, among which specific communities of people, and by what textual and social processes has meaning been acquired? More generally, the questions are: How do meanings change? How have some meanings emerged as normative and others have been eclipsed or disappeared? What do these processes reveal about how power is constituted and operates?" (Scott, 1988, p. 35).

Discourse

A study of discourse can provide answers to some of these questions, because discourses frame relationships among individuals and they provide a range of speech acts that are possible within specific sites. Burbules and Bruce (2005) defined discourses as "forms of socio-historically constituted relations among people, activities, texts, and situations where participation in a discourse means assuming a role within a community of practice" (para. 5). Foucault's theory of discourse recognizes how language is organized and regulated by socially constructed rules which govern what can be said, by whom, and who can be spoken (Iseke-Barnes, 1997; St.Pierre, 2000). The rules of discourse go beyond language and language usage to govern what we think and how we act in the world. As the rules become normalized, other ways of thinking or acting seem unintelligible. A poststructuralist critique of discourse demands that we begin to look at discourse and its productions anew, so that we can begin to ask different questions. Bove (1990) outlines several important questions aligned with poststructuralist thought, including, "How does discourse function? Where is it to be found? How does it get produced and regulated? What are its linguistic, social, and material effects? How does it continue to exist? What are its differences to itself?" (cited in St.Pierre, 2000, p. 486). Resistance

to "natural", dominant discourses is possible once people begin to think differently, hence begin to consider other things to say (St.Pierre, 2000).

Reason

Humanism supports a notion of rationality where a belief in an absolute and transcendent reason exists apart from human experience and from the messiness of our material world. Reason is a grand narrative of humanism; establishing and defining its discourses by asserting its independent existence outside of these discourses and their products. During the Enlightenment, the scientific method became the hallmark of rationality, thus relegating any type of reason not derived by science, as irrational and questionable. Poststructuralism, however, recognizes that reason is not absolute, existing apart from particular historical contingencies. Foucault (1990/1988) for instance, questions how certain forms of rationality have come to be through an analysis of the historical conditions and antecedents that have created the nature of the present. This exercise, he argues, is fruitful for describing "how that-which-is, has not always been" (p. 37), and how particular forms of rationality have emerged through an influence of various historical conditions, occurrences, and events. It is a complex interplay and confluence of elements that involve particular institutional interests, professional interests, class relations, and forms of knowledge throughout history, and of course an entire history of reason. As Foucault (1990/1988) explains,

> What reason perceives as *its* necessity, or rather, what different forms of rationality offer as their necessary being, can perfectly well be shown to have a history; and the network of contingencies from which it emerges can be traced. Which is not to say, however, that these forms of rationality were irrational. It means that they reside on a base of human practice and human history; and since these things have been made, they can be unmade, as long as we know how it was they were made. (p. 37)

Foucault (1990/1988) asks the question how particular forms of rationality have been applied to the human subject.

> How is it that the human subject took itself as the object of possible knowledge? Through what forms of rationality and historical conditions? And finally at what price? This is my question: at what price can subjects speak the truth about themselves? (p. 30)

Foucault (1995/1977; 1990/1978) questions how subjects, who for example, are mad, criminal, or are the subjects of sexual pleasure, can speak the truth about themselves, and at what price? Poststructuralist critiques, then, call us to question reason, its antecedents, its products, boundaries, and dangers (St Pierre, 2000). To problematize the rational/irrational dichotomy creates a possibility and a space to reconsider what has historically been identified as irrational and investigate different types of rationality. For reason is a product of a certain type of discourse that privileges some, and excludes others. "Reason is always situated, local, and specific, formed by values and passions and desires" (St. Pierre, 2000 p. 487). For feminists, the deconstruction, or breaking apart of western reason, has meant the rejection of "truth" identified as such by a privileged few. The rational/irrational, and nature/culture dichotomies have historically seen women associated with the irrational and nature, and men with rational and culture. This places women in a realm of the natural, emotional and sensual, and men in the sphere of reason, culture, and thought (St Pierre, 2000). Liberal feminists, in their search for equal rights, do not reject the rational/irrational binary, instead they are pursuing the recognition that rationality is a trait equally applicable to women. Other feminists argue that such a pursuit is in vain as this conception of reason is inherently flawed. This is where poststructural feminists enter the discussion as they work to shed light on the assumptions which allow this dichotomy to function, and to describe instances where this "rationality" has been transformed.

Power and Resistance

Humanists see power as a product of agency; it is a resource that can be acquired, used, given, or taken. In this conception, agency is seen as a natural endowment, universally accessible to all humans. Although, less fortunate individuals do exist, these individuals are born without the ease of access to agency or freedom of those historically privileged in Western culture. Resistance to their domination is an act performed by an autonomous and distinct self in response to oppressive forces that infringe on individual rights and liberty. And, like agency, liberty and freedom are seen as natural rights. This understanding of power and freedom has been rejected by poststructuralists who do not view power as a negative force or as something that can be possessed.

A poststructural understanding of power sees power as something that exists in relations rather than something that individuals can possess. In this Foucauldian understanding, power is embodied in the everyday activities of all our lives, and in the choices we make to resist or not to resist (Brookfield, 2001). This notion of resistance is a critical characteristic of Foucault's theory of power for without the possibility of resistance, relations of power could not exist; however, power relations are often unbalanced and asymmetrical in ways that seriously and consistently limit the freedom of certain individuals. Foucault (1990/1978) makes the distinction between power and power relations as follows:

> Power', insofar as it is permanent, repetitious, inert, and self-producing, is simply the overall effect that emerges from all these mobilities…power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are all endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society. (p.93)

Power relations are neither fixed nor stable, yet states of domination can exist at an institutional or personal level when these relations are blocked. As an example, Foucault cites instances where children are subject to the unwarranted authority of a teacher, or where students are subject to the abuse of authority imposed by instructors. This understanding of power sees power as a productive force rather than something that is evil or repressive (St.Pierre, 2000). To understand the effects of this productive force, Foucault argues that we must consider "how things work at the level of on-going subjugation, at the level of those continuous and uninterrupted processes which govern our bodies, govern our gestures, and dictate our behaviors (Foucault, 1980, p.97). Foucault's description of disciplinary power highlights another way in which power operates.

Disciplinary Power

To illustrate the workings of this disciplinary power, Foucault (1995/1977) introduces the principle of the panopticon. The panopticon was Jeremy Bentham's idea for the construction of a prison in 1787 that introduced a plan for the management and surveillance of subjects. The basis for this design, and the beginnings of this panoptic vision of surveillance, was influenced by measures taken during the Plague epidemic at the end of the 16th century, to control, monitor, and inspect the populace.

In parts of Europe, efforts to control the plague involved strict partitioning and a shutdown of towns that saw its division into quarters, each of which was overseen by an intendent, and where each street was under the authority of a syndic. During times of quarantine, inhabitants were restricted from leaving their homes; syndics locked the doors of each family from the outside, and delivered the keys to the presiding intendent. Provisions for the family

were assumed by each family, save for bread and wine rations supplied to each household via small wooden canals traversing the span between the street and interior dwellings, and meat, fish and herb apportions which were delivered by way of baskets on pulleys. This process contributed to the creation of isolation and the lack of communication and physical interaction with suppliers, or with other inhabitants.

If circumstances arose where leaving one's dwelling was absolutely necessary, it was carried out in such a manner that meetings with others were restricted. Movement about the streets was only permitted for intendents, syndics, guards, and "crows", those people "of little substance" whose job it was to transport the sick, bury the dead, clean, and execute other unpleasant, vile duties (Foucault, 1995/1977). "It is a segmented, immobile, frozen space. Each individual is fixed in his place. And, if he moves, he does so at the risk of his life, contagion or punishment. Inspection functions ceaselessly. The gaze is alert everywhere" (Foucault, 1995/1977, p. 195). Militia and guards were appointed to the gates, town hall, and each quarter to not only ensure compliance, but also to observe. Observation posts were created at each gate, and sentinels appointed at the end of every street. Syndics report to the intendents during the intendent's daily visits to their respective quarters. Syndics were also charged with the duty of visiting each household on the street for which they were responsible, where every inhabitant was required to appear at the window. Each person was called by name, and compelled to address the syndic to report on their well-being. "In which respect the inhabitants will be compelled to speak the truth under the pain of death". (Foucault, 1995/1977, p. 196), thus allowing the syndic to observe and reveal attempts to conceal the sick or deceased. "Everyone locked up in his cage, everyone at this window, answering to his name and showing himself when asked—it is the great review of the living and the dead" (Foucault, 1995/1977, p. 196).

This was a system of surveillance involving a lasting registration where every thing, and every movement may be observed and recorded, where registration and care of the sick or diseased was centralized.

> The plague is met by order; its function is to sort out every possible confusion: that of the disease, which is transmitted when bodies are mixed together; that of the evil, which is increased when fear and death, overcome prohibitions. It lays down for each individual his place, his body, his disease and his death, his well-being, by means of an omnipresent and omniscient power that subdivides itself in a regular, uninterrupted way even to the ultimate determination of the individual, of what characterizes him, of what belongs to him, of what happens to him. (Foucault, 1995/1977, p. 197)

Just as the plague brought about disciplinary projects, lepers brought about models for, and acts of exclusion. In the 19th century these two projects merged as certain segments of the population were excluded, and like the lepers, symbolic for their historic segregation, so too were "beggars, vagabonds, madmen, and the disorderly" (Foucault, 1995/1977, p. 199). Strategies employed to discipline these subjects involved efforts to treat lepers as plague victims, and so in turn they were inflicted with specific spaces of confinement to not only individualize the exclusion, but also to commit to processes that marked this exclusion. This type of disciplinary power was formalized in the 19th century with the creation of psychiatric asylums, penitentiaries, reformatories, schools, and, to a certain degree, hospitals. This form of power allowed authorities in their ventures to control individuals in accordance with binary distinctions like: sane/mad, harmless/dangerous, normal/abnormal, and to forcibly appoint distinct distributions like "who he is; where he must be; how he is to be characterized; how he is to be recognized; and how a constant surveillance is to be exercised over him in an individual way" (Foucault, 1995/1977, p. 199). Remnants of these disciplinary mechanisms and their historical antecedents of inclusion/exclusion; normal/abnormal, are still found today in our

institutions, and in our corrections and measurements of the "abnormal". Bentham's

conceptualization of the panopticon is an architectural actualization of this very composition

(Foucault, 1995/1997).

Panopticon

Using Jeremy Bentham's architectural design for a prison in 1787, the Panopticon,

Foucault illustrates the workings of this form of power. The Panopticon positions one tower in

the midst of an outer circular building that allows for the continuous surveillance of all the

prisoners. The building on the periphery was divided into cells with two windows within each

cell --one that faced the central tower; and one directly opposite that faced the outside, thus

allowing light to fall across each individual cell. This arrangement created the ability to

individualize and continuously watch each inmate, thus inducing a state of consciousness for

each individual of their permanent visibility. This visibility, although permanent, was also

unverifiable, as subjects within each of these cells would never know when a gaze was upon

them (Foucault, 1995/1977).

> It is an important mechanism, for it automatizes and disindividualizes power. Power has
> its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies,
> surfaces, lights, gazes; in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation
> in which individuals are caught up. (Foucault, 1995/1977).
> Figure 2 portrays a depiction of this design.

Figure 2. Theory of Surveillance: The Panopticon
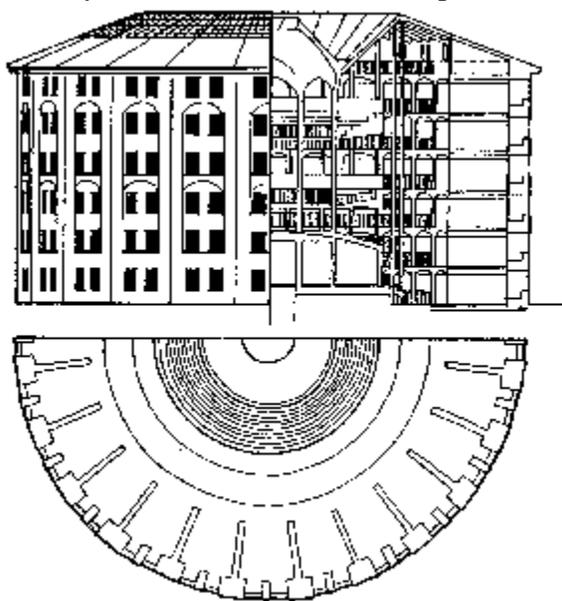
(Bozovic, 1995, Theory of surveillance: The Panopticon section, para1)

Always visible under the scrutiny of the examining gaze from the centre, inmates begin to engage in a process of self-surveillance as the ever-present opportunity for this all seeing eye to observe their activities weighs on them. Under this gaze, individual activity becomes normalized as the prisoners begin to monitor their activity, leading them to act in ways they believe they are supposed to act (Foucault, 1995/1977). Expanding upon this illustration of the panopticon, Foucault describes the emergence of the modern "disciplinary society" that allows the state to control the populace through the functioning of disciplinary power and self surveillance. This disciplinary power can exert influence over space, and time as groups are divided, and activities are ordered and arranged in specific sequences (Brookfield, 2001). "Discipline blocks relations of power in that it objectifies and fixes people under its gaze and does not allow them to circulate in unpredictable ways" (St.Pierre, 2000, p. 49). However, the possibility of resistance remains. A poststructural look at resistance sees resistance, like power,

as something that exists in relations of power, or that is a product of power relations rather than something that is an object itself. As well, there exist multiple and diverse ranges of resistances (St.Pierre, 2000).

Knowledge

For poststructuralists, an examination of power is critical to an understanding of knowledge, for power is implicated in the construction of knowledge and the acceptance of officially sanctioned knowledge. This happens because those who hold positions of power are able to create knowledge that in turn supports their power position while limiting the power of others (Brookfield, 2001). Given that education is one of the primary social institutions responsible for the creation of new knowledge, an examination of the workings of this power/knowledge here is critical. According to Foucault (1980) there is "an administration of knowledge, a politics of knowledge, relations of power which pass via knowledge" (p. 69) that involve a number of interrelated mechanisms. It is these mechanisms that determine how knowledge is produced, and the procedures through which data is observed, recorded, interpreted and disseminated. These mechanisms act as a form of control where dominant discourses and regimes of truth are created (Brookfield, 2001). Foucault (1980) maintains that a regime of truth exists in every society, which he describes as a society's

'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (p. 131)

Foucault's work, along with the work of poststructuralist writers, challenges us to question how certain people, concepts, questions, and writings emerge in particular fields, like

adult education, while others do not, and call into question how these new productions support existing regimes of truth within the adult education community, for example (Brookfield, 2001).

Haraway (1991) argues that science plays an important role in the process of creating knowledge and of creating and actualizing the category of nature that is grounded in a particular historical and political context, which not only defines our place within it, but also supplies means for the domination of our body and our society. "By constructing the category of nature, natural science imposes limits on history and self-formation. So science is part of the struggle over the nature of our lives" (Haraway, 1991, p. 43). Beliefs about nature, and of origins, are not created in an historical vacuum, but are rooted in a patriarchal past that has favored and legitimized the words of men, and has produced a patriarchal knowledge that is widely recognized and sanctioned. Women have inherited this history and the knowledge produced through this patriarchal voice, and so, in attempts to create knowledge, must work to construct a voice. "To author is to have the power to originate, to name. Women who seek to produce natural knowledge, like our sisters who learned to write and speak, also must decipher a text, the book of nature, authored legitimately by men" (Haraway, 1991, p. 72).

The Subject

A humanist conception of the individual is generally understood to be "conscious, stable, unified, rational, coherent, knowing, autonomous, and an ahistoric" being (St Pierre, 2000, p. 500); one who bestowed with a will, autonomy, and intentionality can manifest expression through language and action. This understanding of the individual suggests there exists a stable, and well-defined and distinct self, completely separate and unencumbered by the outside world. This quality of distinctness and separateness then allows the individual to observe

the outside world, study it, understand it, and make predictions to control it, and ultimately to produce "true" knowledge (St Pierre, 2000). An underlying assumption is a belief in an inherent agency, and the belief that through this agency all people can experience freedom, and overcome oppression. "Man, through careful exercise of his rational intellect and will, can free mankind from confusion and error, and those who manage to confront and overcome overwhelming odds become heroes and models for the rest of humanity" (St Pierre, 2000, p. 501). Despite attempts at deconstructing this conception, it is this humanist understanding of self that continues to dominate western thought.

Althusser's work in the 1970s, and his ideas about the construction of subjects by the dominant ideology, began to shift towards more poststructuralist thought. Althusser believed in the constitutive nature of discourse, and consistent with this theory is the notion that "we take up or resist certain subject positions that are already available in discursive formations operating within cultures and are obliged to work within the confines of those positions" (St. Pierre, 2000. P. 502). And, with this understanding, and its implied limits to individual freedom, a new conception of agency must also be theorized. Feminists use this concept of subject positions to describe how their agency is limited through the specific positioning available to them, and how certain positions have differential access to certain types of knowledge and available actions.

Subjectivity

A poststructural view of the subject argues there is no essential or distinct self that exists apart from the particular discourses through which subjects are (re)constituted. We are, in essence, spoken into being through the discourses that are available to us, and are obliged to take up certain subject positions within the confines of these discourses (Barrett, 2005). Our

subjectivities produced within this process can be understood as our conscious and unconscious thoughts and feelings of oneself, and how one makes sense of one's place in the world (Weedon, 1987). Our understandings of our experience and our social reality, however, have no essential meaning, except in language. Through language we learn how to ascribe meaning to our experience, and these meanings, aligned with particular discourses or ways of thinking, structure our understanding of self, or our subjectivity (Weedon, 1987). "It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience" (Scott, 1991, p. 779). Language acquires its effectiveness as a social and political mechanism through individuals who become its bearers, take up particular subjectivities and along with them their implied meanings and values. As Weedon (1987) explains:

> The individual is both a site for a range of possible forms of subjectivity and, at any particular moment of thought or speech, a subject, subjected to the regime of meaning of a particular discourse and enabled to act accordingly…Language and the range of subject positions that it offers always exists in historically specific discourses which inhere in social institutions and practices and can be organized analytically in discursive fields. (cited in St. Pierre, 2000, p. 502)

A discursive field was initially theorized by Foucault in an attempt to explain the relationship that exists between language, institutions, subjectivity, and power. In his conceptualization a discursive field represents the way in which social processes, and structures are ordered through certain institutions, which in turn are situated within discursive fields. They operate as a means of organizing and giving meaning to our world and our institutions. Within each discursive field, such as the family, the church, education, or law, there exists a range of different forms of subjectivity and a range of discourses that situate individuals in either dominant or marginal positions. The dominant discourses in these fields guarantee and legitimize the appropriateness of particular meanings and practices that support the status quo.

A poststructural critique of language and its constitutive forces makes it possible to see how particular discourses position us, making it possible to consider alternative ways we can position ourselves and begin to consider different versions of the world and of reality. As Barrett (2005) argues "from a given subject position only certain versions of the world make sense, thus the way we are positioned and position ourselves within a discourse has implications for how we read people and experiences" (p. 84). Yet, this process of negotiating our positioning is ongoing, shifting continually within our interactions with others. We take up certain positions within the discourses available to us; although, within this process certain positions remain inaccessible, and in our attempts at positioning we are also subject to the positioning others would inscribe upon us. In many instances the multiple positions we take can be not only contradictory, but oppressive as well. Davies (2000) writes that we maintain a desire to constitute ourselves in "acceptable", "correct" ways which can mean assuming "subject positions no one would ever rationally choose" (cited in Barrett, 2005, p. 85). For the poststructural subject, desire is constituted within, and regulated by the available discourses that construct us in particular ways of being and acting (Barrett, 2005). A poststructural construction of subjectivity acknowledges two important mechanisms: agency in individual construction as accessible discourses, cultural practices, and subject positions are taken up, but also coercion into subjectivity, as the subject, in its construction is concurrently subjected to these very same practices and discourses (St. Pierre, 2000).

A deconstruction of the subject in poststructuralism suggests that a subject cannot exist outside of, or before language, for it is a construction produced from the ongoing and unstable effects of language, discourse, and cultural practice. As Britzman (1998) describes, "all categories are unstable, all experiences are constructed, all reality is imagined, all identities are

produced, and all new knowledge provokes uncertainties, ignorances, and silences" (p 226).

Because power exists and operates within discourses and cultural practices, subjects are

constituted within a particular framework that either makes one powerful or powerless, thus

raising several important questions like the following:

1. Who is authorized to speak

2. What can be said?

3. What remains unspoken?

4. How does one become authorized to speak?

5. What utterances are rewarded?

6. What utterances are penalized?

7. Which categories, metaphors, modes of descriptions, explanations, and argument are valued and praised; which are excluded and silenced?

8. What social and political arrangements reward and deprive statements?

9. Which metaphors, modes of argumentation, explanation, and description are valued?

10. Which ideas are advanced as foundational to the discourse? (Cherryholmes, 1988, cited in Yeatman, 1996, p. 9).

While categories created within particular discourses and practices operate as a

means of organizing social life, the exclusion that is created can be resisted. Power does not

reside in any particular subject position itself, and, as Foucault argues, we can say anything. The

problem is not what we can say but what is thinkable. How is it that we can move from a

discourse that only allows certain thoughts, actions, and subject positions to be made, to one

where different thoughts become possible. In the ongoing construction of self, subjectivity is an

incomplete process where a subject signifies and resignifies positions, discourses and practices

taken up in its construction. In describing this complex activity, Butler (1992) argues that:

…the 'I' who would select between them is always already constituted by them…these 'positions' are not merely theoretical products, but fully embedded organizing principles

of material practices and institutional arrangements, those matrices of power and discourse

that produce me as a viable 'subject'. Indeed, this 'I' would not be a thinking, speaking 'I'

if it were not for the very positions that I oppose, for those positions, the ones that claim

that the subject must be given in advance, that discourse is an instrument of reflection of

that subject, are already part of what constitutes me. (cited in St. Pierre, 2000, p. 503)

Agency, like the poststructural conception of subjectivity, is something that is also continually

reworked and renamed in cultural discourses and practices. In taking a feminist poststructural

stance, this research explored the constructed experiences within an online learning context to

question how discourse functions, how power operates, and how particular subjectivities and

subject positions are produced. Feminist poststructural work utilizes the concepts theorized in

poststructural work, although important differences exist among these two traditions. Following

is a more detailed discussion of feminist poststructural work and its departures from

poststructuralism.

Feminist Poststructuralism

Poststructural critiques focus on understanding situations, processes, and events,

and of exploring how things have evolved in particular ways that make only certain versions of

understanding our world make sense (St. Pierre, 2000). A poststructural feminist critique uses

poststructural concepts, but with a political agenda. The focus on this form of critique is on

creating the possibility of change through an examination and exposure of power, and the

productive effects of power, that create oppression and privilege associated with differences such

as gender, race, class, and sexual orientation etc. With an awareness that gender, like other forms

of difference, is socially constructed, poststructural feminists trouble the normalized beliefs of

what it means to be male or female, exposing how this production has served particular interests.

This type of critique opens up the possibility for individuals to take up different ways of being

(Barrett, 2005). It is, as St Pierre (2000) argues, our responsibility to not only examine our own complicity in reproducing social inequities but also to recognize that we are "ethically bound to pay attention to how we word the world" (p. 484). It is within this wording that harmful binaries and distinctions are made and allowed to function. Weedon (1987) writes that poststructural feminism is, in essence, a mode of knowledge production that allows for an analysis and explanation for the workings of power, which also opens up opportunities for resistance. Language is not apolitical for, as a production of power, it represents certain interests. "The site of this battle for power is the subjectivity of the individual and it is a battle in which the individual is an active, but not sovereign protagonist" (Weedon, 1987, p. 41).

This theory offers for individuals an explanatory mechanism for understanding experience, subjectivity, inconsistencies within particular subjectivities, and also for understanding mechanisms for change. Through this form of critique, the illusion of "full subjectivity", and the foundations of individual motivations that influence our actions, can be brought to light (Weedon, 1987). As well, it represents a way of weighing political limitations for change, for as individuals we are constituted within particular forms of conscious and unconscious desires that are also the effects of particular processes and institutions structuring society. These material relations and processes, however, are neither inevitable, nor natural (Weedon, 1987). A more detailed description of the procedures used for data collection, data analysis, and evaluation for this research investigation follows.

Data Collection

This research was conducted in a Canadian university that offered a graduate program online, using online asynchronous text based discussion forums as an integral part of

the learning process. The graduate program targeted for this research employed a learning management system entitled "MOODLE". MOODLE is an acronym for "modular, object oriented dynamic learning environment". This system allows students to access and interact with instructors, other learners, and a number of other tools and features. The MOODLE functions are divided into two columns on the screen. The left column contains "blocks" that group specific functions like, people, administration, news, messages, and student profiles. The right column is organized around course related information like "books" that may be used to present course content, quizzes, discussion forums, and chat rooms. The chat rooms are a synchronous forum that allows the opportunity for students to interact with one another. These discussions are not archived past the duration of the chat sessions in progress. Conversely, the discussion forums present a formal space where discussions with other learners and with instructors are conducted around course related topics, and where participation within discussions is a course requirement. These threaded, text-based asynchronous discussions are archived, thus providing a formal and permanent record of past interactions and discussions.

Procedures

A written request was sent to this institution for permission to conduct research that included a specific portion of their student population, and to interview female students enrolled in the targeted program in 2011 (Appendix A). Ethics approval for this study was sought from this institution along with the University of Alberta, following individual guidelines for the respective universities. Individual instructors within this program were also sent a permission and information letter to contact their students for the purposes of this research

(Appendix B). Approval was received from several instructors, and the female students within their courses were sent an initial information letter and request for participation (Appendix C).

Participant Information

The participants included six female students from this program. Male students in the targeted program were not interviewed as their experience was beyond the scope of this research project.

Contact with Participants

Contact with participants was made initially through e-mail correspondence. Interviews were arranged via telephone, upon participant request given time constraints and geographical considerations. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Participant names were changed during the writing of this research account in order to protect participant confidentiality.

Interview Data

I conducted one semi-structured interview with each of the identified female participants. As interviewing was a critical element of the research data that were collected, a discussion of the nature of an interview in qualitative research and how the interview becomes 'data' follows.

The process of interviewing must begin with an invitation to participate and, as Weber (1986) argues, the nature and quality of such an invitation is critical. The request must be genuine, in a way that "confirms the other" where "the interviewer is genuinely present, committed, and open to the participant" (p. 65). For this investigation, an email was sent to the

female participants registered in the approved program, to request their participation in this research study (See Appendix C). The email included information about the purpose of this research and the nature of the interview process. Students who were interested in participating were asked to e-mail the researcher to confirm their interest in participation. At this time, a consent form (See Appendix D) was e-mailed to the interested participants, and participants were asked to fax the signed consent form to the researcher. The opportunity to opt out of this research study was explained in the initial information e-mail, as well as in the consent form for interview participants. Interview participants were also reminded prior to the first interview that when they agreed to participate in the study, they could subsequently exercise the right to opt out. They were also informed that this decision to opt out could be exercised at any time prior to September 30, 2011. To withdraw this consent, participants were required to inform the researcher of this intent via e-mail.

Through the course of an interview, conversation brings the opportunity to gain increased understanding about the phenomenon under question, but also about each other. While there is the potential for deeper understanding, for growth of trust, and new relationships, there also exists the potential for risk and for abuse (Weber, 1986).

Risk

As do all human encounters, the interview involves risk for both parties. On one hand, we run the risk of revealing that which we do not want to reveal. On the other hand, we also run the more welcome risk of gaining valuable insight into whatever it is we discuss. (Weber, 1986, p.66)

Within an interview there rests both paradox and risk, for, although the interview is private and confidential, results can be public. In addition there exists potential unfairness as the focus of

printed results lies with what the participant says, not the researcher. Also, as a researcher, there

is power to decide what will be included and what will be excluded from print. The element of

trust in this process is critical. For participants, agreeing to participate relays trust, but also hope:

hope that the contributions they make are valuable, and trust that the interviewer will not

misrepresent, or misinterpret their meaning or experience (Weber, 1986). Participants in this

study were invited to complete a pre-interview activity that afforded them the opportunity to

remember and reflect upon their experience prior to the interview. This time for review also

allowed participants time to choose what they were comfortable sharing. This pre-interview

activity was e-mailed to participants once I received a signed consent form. Samples of pre-

interview activities can be found in Appendix E at the end of this document.

Allowing for openness in questioning and for an active role to be taken by the

participant shows an attitude of respect and a willingness to learn something from them.

Throughout the interview process for this investigation, an openness in questioning was critical

to the development of the discussion with participants. The interview guide was utilized as such,

a guide to begin a conversation, although, the way in which the discussions evolved was unique

to each participant. Examples of interview questions that guided the interview process may also

be found at the end of this document, in Appendix F. As Heidegger cautions, however, "the very

act of posing a question is disclosure, for to question is to sketch in advance the context of

meaning in which a particular inquiry will move" (cited in Weber, 1986, p. 68). Responses to

particular lines of questioning also direct the interview in certain ways. Thus, it is shaped

dialogically by both people engaged in the interview process. The nature of the interview also

recognizes both participants' and researcher's thoughts and feelings about the conversation.

Weber (1986) argues that this is important for "having thoughts and feelings about a person is

not a betrayal of what it means to be either an interviewer or participant: on the contrary, it is only in relating to the other as one human being to another that interviewing is really possible" (p. 69). As well, throughout this process Weber (1986) cautions researchers to remember their commitment and responsibility as humans, so as not to detach themselves from the interview experience that turns the process into mere "data", for this tendency leads to an analysis focused on "what was said, forgetting or neglecting 'how' what was said made sense" (Weber, 1986, p.70).

The Interviews

One interview was conducted with each participant and each of the interviews ranged in length from one hour to one hour and forty minutes. The interviews were conversational in style, with the interview questions serving as only a guide. The extent to which the interview followed this guide varied among the interviews conducted.

The first interview with Janet was rescheduled as she had a family emergency to attend to. The ensuing interview was scheduled later in the evening to accommodate Janet's responsibilities as a mother of two young children. During this interview, her youngest child was sleeping on her lap. Beginning the interview, Janet expressed concern over not thoroughly answering or rehearsing the pre-interview questions, although she did spend time thinking about them prior to our conversation. A discussion around these questions evolved into a narrative of her personal journey as an online learner in a graduate program and the struggles, confusion, disappointment, and self-discovery that came from her experiences. I had the sense that she was very honest and open about her experiences, and I felt a great appreciation for her willingness to share her story and personal struggles, many of which I shared. As a student in an online learning

context, I struggled with similar issues around confidence, competence, and juggling work and childcare responsibilities.

Karen, like Janet was very conversational in her interview, although a little less focused in her approach. Karen's story was a little more unstructured and convoluted, thus requiring more clarification on my part. She began the interview with a discussion of her experiences and frustrations with the course she was currently enrolled in, where a lack of interaction and commitment from other participants in the online forum left her feeling irritated and disappointed. Although Karen looked over the pre-interview questions prior to our conversation, she chose not to discuss any question in particular, instead she shared her story of life in Saudi Arabia, her personal journey that led her to pursue graduate study, and her experiences as a graduate student. I was intrigued and fascinated by Karen's story as her experiences were quite unlike my own.

Sophie began our interview with a discussion about her graduate program, and her concerns surrounding the final research project, potential topic choices, and a decision about finding a supervisor. I sensed she felt a sense of urgency to complete the program as quickly as possible. When discussing the pre-interview activity, Sophie provided a very detailed and well-prepared response to one of the questions. Throughout the remainder of the interview her responses stayed very close to the questions posed.

Amy, like Sophie, provided succinct responses to questions, and veered very little from the questions raised. Her story and descriptions of engagement in online discussions suggested very careful planning and editing of responses. She expressed an awareness of her identity creation in this online format, and a desire to be viewed by others in a particular way. I

wondered whether this was also a concern for her within the context of the interview and if this may have influenced her approach to the discussion we had.

Diana was very careful and guarded with her responses in the online discussions, as well and she felt that some participants shared too much in the online forum. Her responses to the interview questions were focused and also veered very little from the questions asked.

Ruth was very open and honest about sharing details about her life and her experiences. She chose not to discuss the pre-interview activity as the questions "did not really speak to her in any way," although she shared very poignant and difficult experiences in both her personal and educational life. She related in her interview that she was "a very intense person", and I felt that this interview was very intense as well. I felt a great sense of appreciation for the level of honesty and the willingness of these women to share their stories for this research endeavor, and for their great insights and contributions to this work.

Once each of the interviews was completed, I reviewed the contributions ofthat participant, and recorded my thoughts and perceptions of the process. At the completion of each interview, permission was requested for further contact for additional clarification and/or description as required. Participants were sent a copy of the interview transcript and given the opportunity to respond to, or add/delete selected information. Within these transcripts I also included follow up questions and questions for clarification. Three of the participants sent the interview transcripts back with their clarifications, thoughts about the content, or additional thoughts.

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The information obtained from this study will be treated confidentially and reported anonymously. Individuals will not be named, and pseudonyms will be used. Data transcripts and field notes are stored in a locked

filing cabinet in the researcher's office, to be kept for a 5 year period After this time all documents will be destroyed. At the completion of the study, audiotapes of interviews will be erased, and any original information stored on a hard drive will be deleted, along with notes that include identifiers of participants.

Data Analysis

For this research I used narrative analysis as an approach for revealing the processes through which individual subjectivities are constituted, identity constructions are made, and of practices and discourses that are taken for granted, that help us to understand ourselves and others. Sondergaard (2002) argues that in seeking access to how categories are constituted, for example, a useful method is to look at data that describe how life is lived, or "material that is full of people's understandings of themselves and of each other, of interactions, of interpretations of what is going on in and around them, of the structures and the materials of everyday life, as well as their ways of practicing these understandings" (p. 191). Narrative analysis represents one important way in which descriptions of how life is lived can be explored. Narrative analysis focuses on language, texts, and discourses that help to describe social reality, and human experience and action.

Narrative Analysis

"Stories have the power to direct and change our lives" (Noddings, 1991, cited in Carter 1993, p.5).

"None of us are to be found in sets of tasks or lists of attributes; we can be known only in the unfolding of our unique stories within the context of everyday events" (Paley, 1990, cited in Carter, 1993, p. 5).

Narrative inquiry is an expansive term for a subset of research designs that use stories as a means of understanding and describing human action. In this context, narrative refers to a "discourse form in which events and happenings are configured into temporal unity by means of a plot" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 5). While much traditional research conducted in education and other disciplines has focused on problems of standardization, and attempts to code or categorize response data from a set of standardized questions, narrative analysis allows for a more contextualized approach that maintains the integrity of language, meaning and context (Mishler, 1986). Polkinghorne (1995) argues that the use of story holds great promise for the work of qualitative researchers, for stories can express the way in which human experience is lived, and can describe this experience and the actions and events that have led to the fulfillment of purpose, the attainment of goals, or the lack thereof.

The type of knowledge that is derived from stories is in contrast to the type of knowledge historically promoted by the Western tradition of science and its rationality. This Western tradition advocates the notion that there exists a distinct form of rational discourse appropriate for the production of knowledge for scholarly disciplines. All other types of discourse, categorized as 'poetic discourse', are seen to be unfit for the production of true knowledge given their emotional, linguistic form. In more recent years, this distinction between cognitive and emotional linguistic forms has been challenged, most notably by Jerome Bruner. Bruner (1985) argues that, rather than just a mode of emotional expression, narrative knowledge represents a valid type of reasoned knowing. In his depiction of modes of knowing, Bruner outlines what he sees as two forms of knowing, a logical scientific mode that he designates paradigmatic cognition; and storied knowing, or narrative cognition. Bruner's contribution is

significant for drawing attention to and gaining acceptance of a very different way of knowing. As Bruner (1985) argues,

> There are two modes of cognitive functioning, two modes of thought, each providing distinctive ways of ordering experience, of constructing reality…Each of the ways of knowing, moreover, has operating principles of its own and its own criteria of well-formedness. They also differ radically in their procedures for verification. (cited in Polkinghorne, 1985 p. 9)

Paradigmatic cognition operates through the process of classifying particular things or ideas into specific categories or concepts that describe membership by a set of common attributes. General concepts may also be classified further into subcategories that define more specifically the features that are recognized as instances of this category. The focus here is not on differences among particular instances of the same category, but on the features that are common or shared that help define the category. Paradigmatic reasoning is an important way for humans to construct their experiences in an orderly and consistent way (Polkinghorne, 1985). "It produces networks of concepts that allow people to construct experiences as familiar by emphasizing the common elements that appear over and over. The networks are maintained and transported through the local languages and are personalized through individual experiences" (Polkinghorne, 1985, p. 10-11).

By contrast, narrative cognition operates through the identification and recognition of the diversity of human experience and behavior, and is directed at coming to understand human action. Where paradigmatic cognition looks to find commonality among actions, narrative cognition focuses on elements that make particular actions unique and remarkable (Polkinghorne, 1985). Carter (1993) writes that "story is a mode of knowing that captures in a special fashion the richness and the nuances of meaning in human affairs…This richness and nuance cannot be expressed in definitions, statements of fact, or abstract

propositions" (p. 6). Stories maintain the complexity of context, and of emotion in which

particular actions are taken. Narrative cognition provides an explanatory framework that can

make individual action understandable and comprehensible. In so doing, this form of cognition

maintains a case by case specificity rather than a movement from the particulars of one case to

generalization. A collection of stories can, however, lend understanding to new actions by way

of analogy where new episodes are identified as similar to previous episodes while maintaining

their unique and specific characteristics (Polkinghorne, 1995).

This distinction between paradigmatic cognition and narrative cognition provides

an important background for understanding the different kinds of narrative inquiry. Polkinghorne

(1995) describes two types of narrative inquiry that correspond to the two types of reasoning

portrayed in Bruner's characterization of linguistic forms. Following is a more detailed

discussion of both the paradigmatic analysis of narrative data that Polkinghorne (1995)

designates as "analysis of narratives", and the analysis that uses narrative reasoning or "narrative

analysis".

Analysis of Narratives

The paradigmatic analysis of data employs data of a storied nature. Storied

narratives differ from other types of data used in qualitative research because of its diachronic

feature. Diachronic data contains temporal elements that describe not only when events occurred

but also the effect these events had on later happenings. In contrast, synchronic data provides

information about a current situation or about particular beliefs held by the interviewee.

Narrative inquiry primarily makes use of diachronic data in the form of storied narratives,

although far from being a list or sequence of events, stories are "sustained emplotted accounts

with a beginning, middle, and end" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 12). The most commonly used source of these storied narratives in qualitative inquiry is the interview.

Paradigmatic analysis seeks identification of common themes or concepts across a collection of storied narratives. Each story is examined for particular elements or instances that correspond to identified concepts or themes. Two types of analysis are possible here: one where concepts are identified from either previous theory, or from other plausible reasoning, and the data is analyzed for instances of these concepts; or secondly, an inductive analysis is employed where categories or concepts are derived from the data. Along with the identification and description of categories, paradigmatic analysis also considers relationships that exist among categories. This method of analysis reveals commonalities that exist among a number of stories, and creates general type knowledge from the analysis of the data set representing particular occurrences or events. The strength of this approach lies in its ability to create general knowledge from a storied data set, although, by necessity, this leads to a lack of emphasis on the uniqueness of each individual story (Polkinghorne, 1995).

A Narrative Analysis

In narrative analysis the end result of research is the production of a story. The data set is diachronic in nature and the analysis involves the composition of a story. Examples of questions that may fuel this type of analysis are those like: "How did this happen?" or "Why did this come about?", and "searches for pieces of information that contribute to the construction of a story that provides an explanatory answer to the question" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 15). This form of analysis calls for a bounded system, or timeline for study. The process of narrative analysis involves synthesis of data elements into a coherent, emplotted account that will help to

explain how past events may have led to the final outcome. This process involves the organization of temporal elements along a "before-after continuum" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 16). The development of the story involves a back and forth movement between the data and the emerging plot, that includes testing of different ideas of emplottment with the data set. Polkinghorne (1995) likens this recursive plot development to the back and forth principles involved in the hermeneutic circle, and the to and fro movement from part to whole that ultimately leads to greater understandings. The process of "narrative smoothing" in the development of a storied narrative may be employed where elements of the data set are determined to be irrelevant to the development of the plot, and as such are excluded from the final product. "The function of narrative analysis is to answer how and why a particular outcome came about. The storied analysis is an attempt to understand individual persons, including their spontaneity and responsibility, as they have acted in the concrete social world" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.19). For the purposes of this research, I conducted a narrative analysis to construct individual stories, followed by an analysis of narratives, where the analysis of data sought common themes or concepts across the collection of stories.

Interview transcripts were sent to the research participants to provide an opportunity to respond to the conversation and to add, delete, or clarify responses. I also inserted questions within the document for clarification. The analysis of interview data, and transcript data employed a paradigmatic type of analysis, or "analysis of narratives". This type of analysis seeks for common themes or concepts across the selection of collected stories, where each story is examined for instances of particular elements of these common themes (Polkinghorne, 1995). The themes that were utilized here were derived from the data set and individual stories. This analysis was guided by several interpretive readings of this data for each participant (Hole,

2007). The first reading of the interview transcripts looked for the location of the narrator in the story, or how the narrator described and positioned herself in the stories she told. The second reading focused on the specifics of the research questions. This reading looked at identifying stories that the narrator experienced in her virtual learning context. The third reading of the interview transcripts sought an identification of the cultural discourses manifested in the stories of these women as they constructed identities learning in this online context. From these readings, and from the researcher's observations and perceptions of the interview data, a brief description of the narrative story of each participant was portrayed, along with a paradigmatic analysis across the collection of narratives. This paradigmatic analysis sought an identification of common discourses across these storied narratives, and also considered the researcher's perspectives and understandings of self that evolved throughout this process.

This study was delimited to the study of six female students from a graduate program at a Canadian university. Evaluation of the research process was another important element of the investigation conducted here. It is this process that I will now address.

Evaluation of the Interpretive Account

Quantitative, positivist methods for evaluating research have been rejected by many qualitative constructivist researchers who argue that such criteria as generalizability and objectivity are inappropriate. As a result, they have sought alternative methods that reflect postmodern sensibilities. These methods include "verisimilitude, emotionality, personal responsibility, and ethic of caring, political praxis, multi-voiced texts, and dialogue with subjects" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 3). Yet, the evaluation of interpretive accounts continues to be judged against positivist views of inquiry that call for hypothesis testing and validation.

Heidegger (1962) has argued that, in the evaluation of an interpretive account, what we are doing is asking whether the concern that motivated the inquiry was answered. This view of evaluation suggests that with this form of inquiry "any notion of validity must concern itself both with the knower and with what is to be known: valid knowledge is a matter of relationship" (Reason & Rowan, 1981, cited in Packer & Addison, 1989, p. 279). Packer and Addison (1989) argue there is no method for evaluation of an interpretation that is value-free. They do suggest that good interpretations answer the initial concerns of the inquiry, and that for interpretive researchers it may be essential to "spend time debunking our own perspectives: pointing out their flaws, and shortcomings, documenting the anomalies and oddities that remain puzzling and unexplained, the fish that have escaped our nets" (p. 292).

This research project that I have undertaken has been a remarkable journey, although I have felt the weight of responsibility to describe the experiences of these women in a thoughtful, respectful and responsible way, knowing that my understanding is foregrounded on my own subjectivity. So, in a study of the subjectivities of these women, I am compelled to consider, also, the construction of my own. The nature of this research involved a description and analysis of common threads or themes amongst the narratives of these participants, and I realize that my own subjectivity had an important role to play in how this description and analysis was conceived, how connections were made amongst the participant's stories, and I also recognize that inevitably, while revealing certain parts of these experiences, certain aspects may also be concealed. In an effort to give this research thoughtful and responsible treatment, I have tried to consider and reflect upon the meanings I have gleaned from the experiences of these women. In addition, I sent the written transcripts of the interviews to the participants for verification and review. Within these transcripts, I also included a few questions for clarification and elaboration.

I have also attempted to be transparent with the meanings and interpretations I have made throughout this process by including exact quotations from participants, and have also used feedback from my supervisor and Committee members as another evaluative measure.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

In a postmodern world, the notion that the self is not given, and that one's subjectivity is a construction that can be redefined and resisted, demands that individuals carry the responsibility to act or to oppose certain subject positions, or constituted experiences that serve to privilege a few while keeping others on the wrong side of harmful binaries. And while there is no guarantee of liberation, as St. Pierre (1997) suggests, we are compelled to persist.

> We must learn to live in the middle of things, in the tensions of conflict and confusion and possibility; and we must become adept at making do with the messiness of that condition and at finding agency within rather than assuming it in advance of the ambiguity of language and cultural practice. (St. Pierre, 1997, p. 176)

Following is a brief summary and description of each of the women who participated in this research, along with a discussion of four discourses identified from the stories these women told that shaped their understandings of self. These discourses are discourses of difference; competence; gender; and connection, conflict and control.

Participants

Janet

Janet is a married 33 year old student with two young children. She is currently taking two online courses in this program, and has completed four additional courses. She has also had experience with online courses outside this program, both as a student and as an

instructor. In addition, she is working part time as a yoga instructor, and as an online instructor at a Canadian college. While she prefers traditional face to face settings over study in an online context, both as an instructor and as a student, she cites the flexibility that online learning affords as an important and valuable characteristic of this form of study. For her, the flexibility is essential at this point in her life as she juggles the demands of motherhood and employment. As an online instructor she finds that communicating effectively and efficiently with students in an online forum is challenging. And, as a student she believes it is more difficult to create relationships as easily or as quickly in a virtual space.

Janet began this program in 2004, and found her first course disappointing, frustrating and a source of great confusion. As she relates, "I applied into this program and thought this is going to be furthering me in my job and helping my career and that kind of thing. So when I took it I was just very disappointed. And, then I didn't take any more classes" (para 46). It was five years before Janet resumed study in this program. During this five year period, she married, and had two children. She felt that this was an important period for her personal growth as she gained confidence in her abilities, and a different perspective toward study. Upon her return to the program, she found that significant changes had been instituted in the course design, as the University incorporated MOODLE as the new learning management system. She found this system to be more effective and user friendly. Most importantly, however, she believes it was her changed perspective and life experience that was the root of her new found success. She describes the online discussions as "very interactive and welcoming", although in terms of "fitting in" with the online community of learners, she describes herself as "on the outskirts". Her interactions with others were primarily within the formal discussion boards, although she occasionally e-mailed instructors and a few select students over the course of her

study. In terms of interacting in these virtual forums, Janet is most comfortable interacting with other women, or with homosexual men, as she feels they are less threatening.

Given her familial and work responsibilities, she is only able to study in the evenings and weekends, although, without the option of studying online, she would not be in a position to pursue further education at this time. And, while she is proud of her accomplishments, she feels that there is a stigma attached to online degrees, and believes others think that it does not garner the same respect as a degree earned in a traditional, face to face institution.

Sophie

Sophie is 47 years old, is a mother of two teen children, and is now completing her ninth and tenth courses within this program. In the past she has also taken a few online courses for professional development. She has two part time jobs, although the contact work she is involved with is flexible, thus allowing her to plan her workload around her academic schedule. When she began this program, Sophie was taking only one course at a time, although she found that her motivation was waning, and so decided to increase her course load so that she could finish this program as quickly as possible. Her preference would be to study in a face to face environment, although given her lifestyle, and familial responsibilities, studying online is a more feasible and practical option.

Before beginning this program, Sophie had a background in science; and as a result, she related, she felt intimidated by the language and background of her peers in the online discussions. It was her contention that her language was "too elementary, straight forward, and blunt", and that others were writing about things she did not have prior knowledge of. She was

also nervous about the evaluation, as she was accustomed to a more concrete grading process, where answers to questions were either right or wrong. Over time, as she successfully completed a few courses she gained confidence, and felt more comfortable with her personal conversational style, that she describes as "direct and uncomplicated". As well, she found that as she progressed through the program, her course selections have become more focused and centered on her area of interest, and as a result she feels more competent with the subject matter. She found the introductory courses were more challenging and intimidating as there were students from a wide variety of backgrounds, with very diverse experiences, who brought very different opinions, but who also could be "scary" in terms of their background knowledge.

This educational experience has also sparked an awareness and interest in how gender is experienced, and in gender equality. Through her discussions with other women who are mothers also, she has begun to question whether their lack of freedom is really self-imposed, or whether it is something "put upon them systemically". Her decisions to pursue an online degree allowed the flexibility to continue her education and still keep up with her responsibilities of raising her children. For her husband, however, she says that working long hours is like "a badge of courage". She feels that men do not carry the same expectation to be available to "raise the kids", and that schools and other institutions reinforce this stereotype.

In all, Sophie feels very fortunate to have had this educational experience, and to have had the opportunity to participate in online discussion forums with students from all over the world, with diverse backgrounds, and diverse opinions. One proviso, or caveat to this experience however, is the uncertainty over the validity of an online degree, and the respect that this title holds relative to a degree earned from an institution offering a traditional delivery system.

Amy

Amy is taking her third course in this program, and is also employed full time. She is a 36 year old married mother with two small children aged two and four. While she enjoys learning in this online context, she is indecisive over what she prefers in terms of an instructional delivery mode. There are, as she states, "pros and cons to both", although she believes that the demands of an online context are greater as active engagement is required.

To meet the demands of this program, Amy studies on the weekend, or wakes early, before the rest of her family so that she is able to complete the course requirements, for as she relates, once the children are awake they require her full attention and care. Her husband supports her study, and will take the children out of town for the day when she has a major deadline. For her, participating in course work and course discussions frequently is essential for maintaining a sense of belonging and engagement with this process as she feels it is easy to lose connection in this format. She experienced a heightened sense of commitment and motivation to the community of learners when assigned to a small group to complete a project, for, as she states, they would notice her, her presence and her absence, and this is something she feels contributes to her motivation and involvement. In this particular course she was also surprised at the connections she built with her group, and with how well she got to know them through their writing. Her interactions with these students, and with learners in other courses, were conducted entirely through the formal discussion sites. She didn't interact with others in chat rooms or by private e-mail.

Amy is an English teacher, and so was acutely aware of projecting a certain writing style and writing fluency in her postings when she identified herself as such. As a result,

she was particularly careful to proofread her posts for spelling and grammatical mistakes. After completing the first few courses she began to identify herself as an adult educator rather than an English teacher in an effort to avoid judgment of her skills as a writer. For Amy, an important distinction between a traditional face to face context and an online one is that online one's self concept is defined by how well one writes, and writing proficiency garners a different level of respect from fellow students. She believes this is very influential, for it is the first impression; the first thing upon which one is judged within this environment.

Diana

Diana is a 39 year old mother, who is taking courses part time while working full time. She is taking her seventh course in this program, and she has also completed two additional online courses for professional development. She feels that online study offers unique advantages, but also disadvantages. With her work and family schedule, however, online study provides the necessary flexibility she requires. She feels that people are often more honest in online discussions, although there is a risk that one's intent can be more easily misconstrued in this context. She was witness to such an occurrence when one particular online debate escalated and became "rather heated", over what she felt was an initial misinterpretation. For her, this incident was a valuable learning experience to witness how an online discussion can go very "wrong". Since this episode, Diana has been more careful editing her posts, and re-reading them several times to ensure she is conveying the meaning she intended. And while she feels people are more honest and forthcoming in an online format, she believes at times individuals share excessive and inappropriate information about their lives. Diana's interactions with other

students are strictly limited to the formal online space. And, she prefers not to share too much personal information with others, opting instead to keep discussions on a professional level.

Ruth

Ruth is a 49 year old single mother of two children, who was born in Guyana and moved to Canada when she was 8 years old. She is studying full-time, and is also working as an instructor in online workshops, as a speaker in workshops, and she owns a micro poetry press. Ruth has completed ten courses in this program, and she has previous experience studying in a distance program for her undergraduate degree. This undergraduate program however did not have online instruction. In terms of preference, between a traditional format and online, she prefers online study as it is more flexible, private, and she is better able to express herself through writing. Ruth uses her writing as a healing process, and to shape dialogue around healing after violent crimes. When Ruth was 16, her father was murdered, leaving her feeling destroyed and unfocused in terms of study. She entered University at 19 in a traditional setting, although she was very unhappy in that environment. She searched for a school that offered a distance program, and she completed her undergraduate degree there.

Ruth feels that writing is "safe", and she appreciates the time one can take to digest discussions, to dialogue, and to have "space" in between. Ruth's experiences in this program and her interactions with others have been largely positive.

Karen

Karen is 61 years old, and is a married mother of three adult sons, and a grandmother of two. She is retired, and as a result feels she has more time to devote to her

studies as she is not juggling the same familial and work related responsibilities of her younger

classmates. She did express frustration over the lack of commitment to the course discussions

exhibited by some of her fellow students. In terms of interacting in the online forums, Karen

primarily engages with others in the formal discussion sites, and occasionally via e-mail with her

instructors.

Karen lived in Saudi Arabia for 30 years on a compound located in a small

community approximately 4 ½ hours from neighboring communities. Like many of the women

she met on the compound, although she had a University degree, she worked only temporarily in

the compound's administration building checking invoices. Her husband's career as an engineer

was financially more profitable and so they made the decision that she would stay home with the

children. They moved to Saudi Arabia when her eldest son was 3 years old. For the family, she

felt it was a wonderful life, and the financial rewards were great, so as a result, leaving was

difficult. They moved back to Canada as her husband was forced to retire at 60 years of age. She

believes that living in Saudi Arabia for an extended period of time, in a context where women's

voices are silenced, has changed the way in which she interacts with others. For her, discussions

online have provided a space where she can feel more confident engaging with others.

My analysis of the interview data involved a construction of individual stories

from the interview data followed by an exploration of commonalities among the stories. A

number of different readings and attempts to look at the data in different ways was completed,

wherein a critique and examination of my own subjectivity and frame of reference was

conducted. Four discourses identified in this research investigation that helped shape individual

subjectivities and identity constructions of these six women were discourses of difference;

competence; gender; and connection, conflict, and control. Explorations of these four discourses

will be discussed in the ensuing sections.

Discourses of Difference

Discourses of difference shaped how these women came to understand themselves

through an awareness of the "other" and through hierarchal binary relationships that defined and

made this difference possible, and that also defined what was normal. Discourses around

difference coalesced around three common themes; existence of an online/offline binary;

differences between face to face and online learning; and an awareness of self in relation to the

"other".

Online/Offline Binary

The binary of online or offline education privileges traditional face to face

learning, reducing online learning as a marked category, and an endeavor requiring justification.

And, for Janet and Sophie, this distinction created conflict as they felt their learning experiences

online were very valuable for their personal growth, and yet they felt the sense that these

experiences were not valued by others given the context in which their learning occurred. As

Sophie expresses:

> I would never have understood how rich the experience of online learning can be. So,
> coming from your only experience with online prior to that has been correspondence
> courses. I did one in my undergraduate degree and most of it was you do the assignments,
> you hand them in. So it wasn't an online kind of experience. And, I'm also appreciative of
> the ability to study with people that are from around the world. Although they are
> Canadians, they are studying abroad, but a different perspective of having people in my
> classes that were teachers, one in Holland, one in Italy, one in India, and then across

Canada. It has been very interesting to be able to bring together those experiences. The only thing I still haven't reconciled about having done my Master's degree that is built entirely on distance learning, I haven't decided whether that has the same status in academia, than someone who did a Masters at a different school. I don't know the answer to that. To me it does… but I don't know outside of that whether a distance education has the same status as a bricks and mortar education.

Has anybody ever questioned that?

Only once, but I said, well at least it is better than your undergraduate degree isn't it? So, when you get your Masters we'll compare who is better. I don't know. I was doing a job interview once, I was on a panel, and somebody did say about a fellow who had a Masters through distance, that it just didn't seem he had the validity of someone who had done the rigours of the classroom. And that was before I even started, but it sort of stuck with me as a comment. I wondered whether that would be true going forward. (Sophie transcript, p. 14 para 11-13)

Janet shares similar concerns, "people say, why would you do an online course? That would be horrible in terms of graduate study work. There is a stigma around doing an online graduate program. It is not highly regarded" (Janet, p. 11, para 9). Janet's decision to pursue an online program of study was also questioned by others in academic positions, although, like Sophie, she valued the experience.

A family member of mine, he is an instructor at a University, and when I told him what I was doing, he said, oh why would you do that? You are wasting your money. All they do is take your money, and leave the students to flounder. And, I see if there are kids who come straight from school and they are 22 and have never been in an online environment, and they try to do online courses, yeah, they are going to fail because they've always had instructors telling them exactly what to do and how to do it and when to do it. I think it takes a lot of maturity to be part of something like this. It is not worth it to argue or to discuss it with him, but that is where that comes from. He is a professor at a University and his opinion of it isn't very good. (Janet, p. 11, para 13)

She was also told by someone from a different institution that these programs are "not as academic" (p. 11, para 13). Janet believes that their resistance to this form of learning results from an unwillingness to embrace change, something which she feels makes her highly adaptable, and able to face the challenges of a future where this form of learning will become a common fixture in society. As she explains:

> My perspective has changed because I know that if these people tried to do an online course they wouldn't be able to. They may be a little bit older so it is difficult for them to accept change and to accept the fact that this really is going to be the change for the future. You know they have been saying that for 20 years and it really hasn't taken hold, but it has started to. I'm not sure if they are stuck in their old ways and they are not willing to change, so that is why. And I found that very empowering. You know maybe they are not willing to change, and I thrive on the fact that I enjoy change and I am able to adapt to Facebook, and I can run my own business, and I can do a lot of things that make me very adaptable. (Janet, p. 11, para 13)

Janet's and Sophie's stories reminded me of how easily one's belief and sense of accomplishment can be potentially diminished by stereotypes that create harmful binaries, like face to face/online learning. Like Sophie and Janet, the validity of my own online Master's degree was questioned by a friend of mine. Upon graduation I decided to pursue further study, and applied to this doctoral program at the University of Alberta. Given my background in distance learning, my friend expressed great surprise that an institution, like the U of A, "would let me in". However, I do value and appreciate the opportunity I had to be a part of the online learning communities in which I participated. For many women I spoke with, this unique learning space was the source of many surprises, and the difference between a more traditional learning space and online was the root of some interesting revelations.

Learning Experiences Online and Face to Face

For Janet, Karen and Diana there was a sense that learners were more honest, open, and less judgmental in this online space, perhaps as a result of a feeling of greater anonymity. Diana enjoys the nature of online discussion boards, for as she states:

I like sometimes that we can just post our ideas and walk away. As opposed to getting into long winded conversations, because sometimes I find when you do that people don't talk as much. They don't share as much information. They may feel intimidated or what have you, but I find online people just post their thoughts, regardless of what the information or the reaction is going to be from other people. I find sometimes there is a lot more honesty…, I feel that people really put a lot out there about themselves, far more than they would if they were in a class. I really do. I don't know why, maybe it is that some people consider it to be anonymous in a certain sense. You can't see me. You can see my name, and you can read my posts, but you can't see me. So, I can say a lot of the things that I wouldn't say if I were sitting beside you in a classroom. But, in my experience, within every course, that always struck me, how honest people are online. (Diana, p. 2 para 1; p. 9, para 12)

There is however, as Diana relates, "a line you can cross" (Diana, p. 10, para 11) in terms of how much you share. She describes an experience within one course where students held conflicting views, and were also very open about their personal relationships. As she states, "I learned more about this gentlemen then I ever should have known, because I know more about him than I did about a best friend. And that is saying something" (Diana, p. 10, para, 9). Diana feels this forum should remain professional, and that personal information is both unnecessary and inappropriate. "I am open and honest, only as it applies to the course…If there are things that apply directly to the course, that don't reveal too much about me, I don't care. I am careful not to cross that line" (Diana, p. 10, para 11).

And Janet, while she feels fewer inhibitors exist in an online space, she also feels that some meaning can be lost within these interactions as subtle nuances can be missed. As she states, "things are a little bit lost. That is what my gut tells me anyway. Even though too, it gives you a forum you can be a little more frank in, and maybe that is why, you don't have to worry about someone in a face to face format judging you" (Janet, p. 8, para, 2). Overall, Janet describes the nature of the online community as "welcoming, interactive, forgiving, and supportive" (Janet, p. 8, para 2). Her view of these online discussions however, has gone through a significant transformation since her entry into this program. This particular evolution will be discussed in a later section.

For Karen and Ruth, asynchronous discussions in this virtual context allowed time to think and digest, while also providing "space in between".

> I find that I am not very good at thinking quickly. And being able to come back with something very quickly. Yeah, I'm one of these people where somebody will say something and I will think two hours later, well that is what I should have said. So, I do better with the online because it gives me time to think it out. Whereas my husband, he thinks and speaks, without too many problems. So, I have a hard time if I am trying to discuss something with him because I haven't sat down and worked it all out first. I just end up getting frustrated. So, I find the online is much better for me that way. Yeah, I don't get frustrated trying to put my own ideas down. (Karen, p. 11, para 6)

This online context also gave Karen greater confidence in her interactions with others. She described herself as "not vocal" in public, although the online environment provided a space where she could feel comfortable conversing with others, and that also offered a new found sense of freedom.

> 30 years living in Saudi Arabia, surrounded by men that you didn't argue with under any circumstances just puts a whole different nuance on how you interact with people…Well you know you can be a lot more confident online. No one is going to look you in the face

and say that you are stupid or you did something wrong, ever. That's just not going to

happen. They might say that you said something wrong, or they disagree with something

that you said, but it is always going to be phrased like that. (Karen, p. 13, para 2, para 4)

Ruth also prefers the online space as she feels she is clearer and better able to express herself

through writing. She shares the following:

> Writing to me I've just always loved it. It is safe in many ways. I know you ask for many
>
> writers it is not that safe depending on where you live, but for me personally it is safe.
>
> There is time to digest, there is time to dialogue, and there is space in between. Face to
>
> face you are just in the moment and you are just kind of going and you are like, why did I
>
> say that? So, that is what I really really like about it…I just prefer my privacy…and online
>
> you are not in the same intense space, you are not breathing the same air. (Ruth p. 5, para
>
> 2, 4; p. 13, para2)

The nature of this virtual learning space has provided very valuable opportunities for these

women, although perhaps the most valuable opportunity that each of these women shared was

the occasion they were given to experience and learn from a very diverse group of learners.

Diversity

The opportunity to dialogue with other learners who held diverse opinions, and

with different backgrounds, was the source of valuable learning, and yet this diversity was also

the source of discomfort, disrupting beliefs along with their conceptions of self, especially as it

related to others. These women defined and redefined their subjectivities based on where they

positioned themselves in relation to others.

Diana found with every course, a renewed stage of trying to determine where she

"fit" within the group. These negotiations however, often led to feelings of intimidation.

> In terms of this course that I have entered into, where it has been a real mixed group who
>
> bring a lot of very different perspectives, there are times in those courses where I may feel

a little intimidated. Some people have had more experience than me, they may have had, I don't know, taken more courses in the area of the particular course that I was enrolled in. And, I don't know, I just kind of sat back and read other people's postings and discussions before I thought about mine really, and maybe that is just me, before I posted. Because I thought I want to be able to at least keep up. (Diana, p.6, para 6)

Unlike most learners who entered this program, Sophie began this program with a science background, thus creating for her an identification that set her apart from others and one that highlighted for her, her difference in relation to others. As a result, she struggled with a negotiation of self as a competent and valuable member of this online community. As she related, "science is not really, it is not really always factual, but there is not a lot of grey areas. There is not a lot of interpretation in terms of what the reader shows. You can argue the statistics on the research, whether it is valid, etc. But when you look at chemistry, the formulas either work or they don't" (Sophie, p. 4, para4). And, as a result she felt her language became "very straightforward and blunt", unlike the language used by others.

And, so the first time I am online, and I am posting, I was terrified of posting in the forum because I was reading the language people would use, and I am thinking, I don't know any of this stuff. These people have read stuff about the development of religion, and they know the history of every world war. A lot of people were history majors, or there was one girl with an undergraduate degree in theology. I just found the language I used was so simplistic, because of my background. (Sophie, p. 4, para 4)

Over time, Sophie gained confidence, coming to appreciate her own unique and personal writing style.

I have never been a person who would choose to use a complicated language when I could choose to use something directly. It's not how I am. You might as well say it the way it is. So, I also got really, as I moved through, a really deep appreciation for what my classmates had to offer, in terms of their life experience. And, I got to really appreciate the

people that were taking classes from other parts of Canada, but also throughout the world.

(Sophie, p. 4, para 4)

Interestingly, although Sophie expressed an appreciation for the diversity within the group, and the ability to study with people from around the world who held different perspectives, she tended to shy away from conversing with certain learners because of their difference. Certain learners intimidated her because of their impressive backgrounds. She identified one female student in particular whose educational and professional background was something that, as she stated, "scared me to death…there is no way I could compete with a mind like that…you are too scary for me. I don't know all these things. Although, now I've narrowed my focus a little bit more so I don't tend to come across too many people that I find intimidating (Sophie, p. 10, para 3). She was also careful with her interactions with others when it appeared that English was not their first language, where the possibility of misunderstandings was a more likely outcome. As she stated, "think I wondered, if he misunderstood that posting, did everybody misunderstand it? It was my first or second class. I was a little bit embarrassed that maybe other people were saying, this girl is a psycho. What's the matter with her? I felt like defending myself. I'm not wrong, you just didn't understand what I was trying to say" (Sophie, p. 11, para 2). This illustrates the reason for her wariness, but also the importance of representing herself within this space in a certain way, and of being recognized as such. The permanence of text in these spaces, and the way in which it lingers, creates a very different context for learning and for defining one's identity. And, as a learner in this context it is difficult to know whether others have agreed with you, disagreed with you, or chose to disregard your postings in the future as a result, or whether you were relegated as an outsider. In a face to face situation there are other cues available, and online it is easy to ignore others. Contributions are "out there", always visible, but

without a sense that others have read it unless they specifically target a response, and it creates a

space where resolution of a misunderstanding can seem elusive.

Janet was 26 years old when she began this program and felt that, because of her

age, it was difficult to relate to the content and to other more mature students in the program.

It was difficult for me to relate to the people who were in the courses at the time. I think
the majority of people who were in there were quite a bit older than me. They were taking
these courses because they were at the transition point in their life. And they were looking
at a different career. To me, it just felt very impersonal as well. And these people were all
trying to prove just how smart they really were. And, I couldn't do that. So, yes, the
forums had a big part to do with it (Janet, p. 5, para 2)… Perhaps I didn't have a lot of
worldly experience either, so it was difficult for me to relate it to anything. And, just the
course content, the textbooks that we used were very frustrating. I don't know what I did
with that textbook because it was awful. I could hardly even read it. So, I guess I just felt
really dumb. I was disappointed and I thought, well I guess this isn't something that I can
do. (Janet, p. 5, para 1)

Janet passed this first course, although she continued to feel she didn't have the knowledge,

experience, or background of other students, and as a result did not feel successful in this

endeavor. She ultimately questioned her decision to continue this program of study, and

subsequently discontinued her registration for a period of five years. Since returning to the

program, however, Janet has come to appreciate and value this learning experience and the

contributions she is able to make to the learning group.

In the first course well, I was a kid back then really. It was a long time ago, but it felt like
the instructor wasn't very helpful either. And, since coming back it seems everyone is
much more helpful, from the instructors to the students in the class. That being said, I
think that I'm much more determined, I think I'm...I'm not worldly, but I think I'm much
more worldly than I was then. So, you are much more flexible in terms of realizing that
everyone else is human too, and things happen. (Janet, p. 8, para 4)

Amy, like Janet, feels she is "better suited" to this type of learning now as a 36 year old than she was at 19, as she began undergraduate study. For her, online learning demands more active engagement and participation, and she believes that in this context students are able to gain more from other learners than they would in a traditional face to face setting. And you learn more from the other learners too than I think you would in a classroom setting… because they are having to respond from their own experience, so hearing from their experience I am learning from them in a more direct way than I think I would in a classroom" (Amy, p. 4, para 2, 4). Amy believes that she did not possess the experience or independence necessary for this type of engagement as a younger student. She is conscious of how much she shares with the online community and is aware that given "the diversity of the population. There is always going to be someone that knows a lot more than you do. Right, but I think that it would be like that in any kind of route. There will always be people who do not have as much life experience, and people who have more" (Amy, p. 14, para 12).

All the women I spoke with primarily engaged in online discussions in the formal space rather than chat rooms. Occasionally a few of these women would e-mail other learners or instructors privately. For Karen, however, this decision was based on her conviction that she is "too old" to engage in this form of communication.

> I've never used it. I think I'm too old. I really do, I think that is part of a whole different generation, the comfort with chatting online. I could never do the Yahoo messages. One person would be talking to me, and then another person would join in, and I'd be like oh my god. Yeah, so my whole thing with it is I think I am just too old for it. (Karen, p. 7, para 13)

Karen however, did enjoy and appreciate the formal discussion boards, and through these connections has developed a greater self-awareness and value for the diversity that this context allows.

I enjoy that part of it, I really do. I like looking at the material and trying to figure out what people are trying to say. And, one thing I have learned through all of this, from the very beginning up until now, is to realize that you do have a perspective, that you do have a frame of reference. When I first started I used to think everyone thinks the same way I do… But, now I know. It is an obvious part of everything that goes on, even the way people answer and the way they think, and what authors are thinking when they are writing. I've really enjoyed the whole program, but that is the one part that has been really good for me. And it is really good for the way that I deal with other people. (Karen, p. 16-17, para 2, 4)

Ruth echoes this appreciation for the many different voices in the online space and the opportunity to connect with a diverse group of learners. She describes the online forums as,

It is way more inclusive. There was one course, well a couple of courses with a few young ladies in there and young fellas, and I think in when in hell would I be studying with a 24 year old? It was totally brilliant. I love that…. And the different writing, and the lower case and la la la, and I think go kids. I ran a daycare for years and I loved it because there was a range of kids. I was never a fan of toddler room. The different levels of ages, I like the combination. It does not take away. People assume they would not have that experience, they wouldn't know. You tell me when you were 16 you didn't have experience? You didn't have a voice? You sure did. It was powerful. I love that. (Ruth, p. 13, para 4, 6)

These online forums can support connections and access to a diverse group of learners, creating powerful opportunities to co-construct knowledge and cross distances that are not solely geographical, but social and cultural as well. Yet, within this space, certain people, events or ideas may also be excluded. For many of these women, feelings of intimidation and beliefs that they lacked "significant" experience, led to doubt, confusion, decreased participation, and decreased feelings of competence. I shared many of these same feelings in my own experience learning in an online space, although I realize now, since talking to these women, it was not that I didn't have the background or experience to offer valuable contributions to the group, it was

that I did not value the background and experience I had. For the women I spoke with, judgments about their competence were also continually redefined and influenced by the connections with others, along with validation received, especially as it related to marks awarded.

Discourses of Competence

How these women defined and redefined their feelings of competence throughout their online learning experiences was a common theme, shaping how they came to understand themselves, and how they saw themselves fitting in with particular learning groups, and with the context of graduate study.

When Sophie began this program, she was "terrified" by the language and background of other students in the program. And, for many of these women, marks awarded for courses and for course assignments was an important indicator of value, that also gave them a better sense of their positioning within the course and within the program. The first two required courses within this program involve an evaluative measure of pass/fail, which caused concern in terms of individual performance, especially as it related to the performance of others.

> I found that when I first started, the first two courses especially, I took the required courses first, so they are only pass/fail courses. You don't really get any feedback in terms of where do I stand? And, having come out of the undergraduate program, although that was several years ago, you are used to getting a grade. You are used to having very concrete, you have an exam, you can see which questions you got right and which questions you got wrong…. And, I got through the first two courses, and into the one where I actually got graded, I'm not sure which one I took, but I thought, okay, I am getting a little bit more comfortable. (Sophie, p. 4, para 4)

Her sense of competence grew as she progressed through the program, and her initial feelings of intimidation, as it related to the background, writing fluency, and experience of others, changed also.

Diana believed that she experienced different stages in becoming a competent learner in this context, both in terms of learning in this online context and in terms of becoming a graduate student. For her, feelings of intimidation and negotiations of positioning formed a stage experienced within each new course.

Janet, like Sophie, voiced concern over her competence and ability to be successful at both graduate education, and online study in this program. As she relates,

> The first course was, to be completely honest I felt really dumb, the theory component of it. In my undergrad, I completed it at U of A, I wasn't looking at going into any graduate studies… I came from a small town and I went to a small community college, I just didn't have the knowledge that that would even be something that I would want to pursue. So, when I did apply to [this graduate program] and I got in, and I started doing that first course, just the theory, I didn't understand it. I passed the course and everything, it is a pass/fail right. But, I just didn't know if I had the knowledge to be able to do something like that, and that is why I thought, well, I'm just going to look at something else. (Janet, p. 5, para 1)

She did however persist, and is now, "less worried about what other people think when I post" (Janet, p. 6, para 12), and has changed her perspective about her ability to commit to and be successful at this endeavor.

Amy also shared feeling of trepidation upon beginning a graduate program, particularly given the online component involved in this program. As she relates,

> I was very nervous about whether I could even learn in this environment. Now I know that I can. I was even concerned whether I was ready to be in a Master's level program. I wasn't sure that I could do that. So to do that online made me very nervous. But now I can

see that most of the other people are at the same stage, then I feel a lot more comfortable

that my opinion actually is meaningful. And that people may learn something from the

things that I say. (Amy, p. 13, para 7)

Amy's confidence and feelings of competence have increased throughout her experiences in the

program, influencing how she defines herself and her place within discussions. Amy is an

English teacher and as a result, is also acutely aware of how she projects herself through writing.

In the beginning of the program she identified herself as an English teacher, although she felt the

weight of responsibility this entailed. As a result, she began to identify herself as an "adult

educator", although as she has gained confidence and experience in this program she has become

more comfortable sharing this information.

> I teach English. So, I want to make sure I am not being repetitive and I want say
>
> something meaningful. And then I check my spelling and my grammar because they know
>
> I teach English. It would look really bad if I had spelling and grammar mistakes… because
>
> in my other courses I didn't, because I didn't want to be judged for my writing skill just in
>
> case I had a mistake or an error. So I identified myself as just an adult educator. But now I
>
> feel more comfortable with it. But, I do sense that, you know. (Amy, p. 9 para 15; p. 10,
>
> para 4)

Karen has also noticed in the online forums, an increase in the confidence and

competence amongst learners as they become more experienced interacting in these formal

discussions." I noticed in other courses too, that you have some people in the beginning of it

don't respond or put a lot into it, or don't seem to. And then as the course progresses, they get

better at it and get easier with it" (Karen, p. 2, para 4). And for her, her own self-image and level

of confidence "have gotten stronger from the beginning until now" (Karen, p. 18, para 20).

Discourses of Gender

Hidden assumptions about sex and gender permeate our discourses and our consciousness, framing relationships, and acting as an organizational tool in our social world, imposing structures that dictate what is acceptable and allowable for males and for females (Camussi & Leccardi, 2005). Discourses of gender played a very important role in how these women understood themselves, in the decisions they made, and in the nature of their engagement and participation with others in the online discussions. Following is a discussion of the unique ways in which each of these women adhered to, and/or resisted particular discourses related to gender, and how they influenced the construction of individual subjectivities that includes a review of gender roles and the nature of their engagement and interaction.

Gender Roles

Sophie chose to study online given her lifestyle and familial responsibilities, although since she began this program she has begun to question her "freedom", and the absence of gender equity in a country like Canada, where many believe equity exists. As she states,

It is kind of depressing taking gender studies actually…because we think of ourselves as equal in Canada, or not necessarily equal as much as probably better than most other countries in the world in terms of being recognized as people, and having certain rights that are equal, things like domestic abuse and those sorts of things. And equal pay for equal work, but then you start to study these issues and you think, we are so not even close. (Sophie, p. 12, para 12-14)

Sophie has taken on the majority of childcare responsibilities, and has chosen a career where she could work close to home, and online study so that she could be available for her children. She considers this opportunity "a gift" for she has not missed much of her children's lives, however,

she has begun to wonder whether her lack of freedom is a lifestyle she chose, or whether she had much choice to begin with.

> Looking at this whole journey for myself, as I watch the difference and talk with my friends who are also mothers, I don't know whether that is self imposed, whether that lack of freedom is something that we put on ourselves, or that is put on us systemically? And, I think it is probably a little bit of both. For me, my husband works in a demanding environment, and I have the ability to work in an environment…So, for me, I've always taken on the majority of the childcare responsibilities because I work a shorter day. And, I've worked close to home most of the time I've been raising the kids. And, his job isn't like that, but now that I've taken gender and leadership, I kind of think it is because he works in this man's world and it is like a badge of courage to work these long hours… So, I chose to take this online class because my kids were old enough to be independent, but not old enough to stay home on their own when they are ill, or to transport themselves to their activities in the evenings. So, I chose to because I would be available…but does the system use me, or do I use the system?" (Sophie, p. 12, para 10; p. 14, para 3).

Sophie also believes that women, not men, are judged by their children, their behavior, and how they are raised, and they are expected to take on this responsibility. She shared one story of her daughter becoming ill at school, and the staff called her sister when they were unable to reach her, before they attempted to contact her husband, their father. "The school went through the female contacts first, which was really interesting… When my husband was contacted, he did leave. But, the system, I don't know what they were thinking. So, systemically, they do have a tendency to call mothers. Mothers get called more. Mothers are given more responsibilities. (Sophie, p. 12, para 10, 12)

Like Sophie, Amy, Janet and Diana chose online study given the flexibility this type of study affords, and the need to schedule their study around other work and familial responsibilities. Amy states that she "couldn't do it any other way…but I think if I had the

choice, and it could work, I would probably go to the class" (Amy, p. 6, para, 6, 8). Amy does not believe that she has this choice at this stage in her life.

> Not that men don't take care of their children too, but I think for me once the kids are up, I really can't do much, other than take care of them for the day…I use the mornings, so I wake up before everyone else and do my readings. My posts I can do at work, or I do them in the evening when the kids are in bed. I really can't do much with my family unless my husband takes then away, so I usually try to plan a week in advance…When I have a big paper due, my husband takes my children away for the day. I have to plan for that. (Amy, p. 2, para 23; p. 15, para 2)

Diana voices similar sentiments in terms of online study. "I love the flexibility, because sometimes I study and I do research, and I write in such unusual hours, but it is what is doable for me, between working and being a mom and everything else, having that flexibility is great" (Diana, p. 1, para 16). Janet also highlights the importance of this flexibility, and the need to schedule her study around other childcare and work responsibilities.

> I like the flexibility of the online learning. I just had a baby last year, a year ago today. And [online learning] gave me that flexibility when I wasn't sleeping normally and doing a lot of other mom things. I was able to at two o clock in the morning when she was up, I could pop onto the computer with her in my arms, and do some of that stuff that I needed to get done, so there is a lot of flexibility… I have my one year old and a four year old. And, they are my full time job, so the part time work that I do I just fit around where I can. Yeah, mostly at night. My husband tries to help me but he works full time, but he will try and give me a day during the week, usually on weekends where I can just go and do homework for the day. And, especially for assignments, I am more of a weekend warrior when it comes to that. I am a school weekend warrior. I guess it isn't always the best way to go, but it has been working. I've been getting things done. (Janet, p. 2, para ; p. 7, para 5)

Karen also took on the primary childcare role when her children were growing up in Saudi Arabia.

Most of the women that I knew and were friends with had University degrees, and jobs before they came over. This was a choice they had made too, because they wanted to be home with their kids. So, that first eight years or so, that was great… in a family sense, it is a great life. A lot of money, nobody is short of money. And then it just got harder and harder to give it up. So, we just ended up staying. As did most of the other women I knew. (Karen, p. 19, para 10, 12)

Karen's experiences in Saudi Arabia have had, and continue to have a profound influence on how she understands herself, her position, and how she interacts with others. As Karen relates, "I just don't have the same assurance in myself" (Karen, p. 13, para 15). For the greater part of her life in Saudi Arabia, her role and identification was that of wife and mother. One exception to this was her experience and identification as a bridge player.

I played bridge. That was the one thing that I did over there that was totally mine. I wasn't a wife, I wasn't a mother; I was just a bridge player. And, I can argue there in a room full of people with no problem at all. And, it didn't matter if the person I was arguing with was a man or a woman (Karen, p. 13, para 7)

In this context she relates "I felt confident" (Karen, p. 13, para 9), yet this confidence did not extend outside of this context. For her the online forums have been a valuable outlet for her to discuss ideas, and to redefine herself, and her views of the world. And, it has provided a space for her to connect with others who may share similar ideas, for as she shares,

My husband, who completely and totally disagrees with everything that I think. So, every discussion is a harangue. I'm not sure which one of us is haranguing, it depends on the day. But, we both end up feeling very frustrated because we can't make the other one understand what we are trying to say. My husband is a wonderful man. He is not a feminist by any stretch of the imagination. He is totally an engineer. Everything has to be rational and objective. Even though those two terms don't actually mean anything, that to him, that's his world. So, he can't understand why I found all this very interesting, or why I find it true. So that is probably why I just don't bother. I just pull back and do it online. (Karen, p. 13, para 15)

Along with the roles and responsibilities that "come with" motherhood, gendered assumptions and discourses also acted in ways that confined, and defined the manner of their interaction and participation in the online forums.

Gendered Engagements and Interactions

Karen feels that discussions in the online forums need one individual in the group who can "draw people out", and start a conversation among the members, and as she states, "it is usually a guy…and, also men are more willing to criticize than women" (Karen, p. 2, para 6, 8). She believes that men and women take on different roles in these discussions in large part due to gendered expectations and assumptions. And, although she believes most women are uncomfortable when they are challenged in these discussions, she enjoys and values this type of interaction.

> Men are better at calling people on stuff. And, I'm always good when somebody calls me
> on something because I can think about it and say, well maybe you misunderstood me or
> you're right and what I said was stupid and I should have said this…: I really do think
> women are uncomfortable disagreeing. They are uncomfortable calling somebody on
> something. And, they definitely have a hard time doing that… I think it is just cultural.
> We're still part of a lifestyle that expects men to be the ones that take the lead. And, if
> they don't take the lead then no one does. (Karen, p. 13, para 1,7,9)

Karen however, enjoys these types of challenging discussions. In one particular course, she recalls this type of discussion she had with one male student: "He and I fought most of the term. I mean just back and forward, not bad or anything, just differences of opinion. And he enjoyed it. I enjoyed it. And, other people would sort of get in on it a little bit. I liked it. It was fun" (Karen, p. 4, para 9). And this online environment has provided a space for Karen to interact with others

in new ways, and has given her a new found sense of freedom and confidence in these interactions and in her ability to contribute to them in a meaningful way.

Ruth also feels that there is a difference in the way in which men and women interact online, however she believes that the online forums have created important and valuable spaces for different voices to be heard. In terms of these differences she states that:

> The guys don't go into the emotion as much. And, all of this gender stuff is cultural stuff too, right. I think there is a bit of a difference… But, I think the online really gives much more room for a flow or fluidity with both genders… I think online is a very liberating thing… And that is another thing with writing, for the assignments pretty much everyone has to say something at least once. It is a huge gift; you get to hear all kinds of different voices. (Ruth, p. 15, para 4)

Even though online spaces create the possibility for this inclusiveness and openness to others, the reality does not always live up to these ideals. Ruth shares a story within one course where she felt silenced and excluded, and where she felt the voices of women were absent. In this narrative, Ruth describes an experience where conflict arose with an instructor over the questions she posed within the discussion forum asking for the inclusion of readings and materials written from women's perspectives. In two previous courses, this request was met.

> I saw that they were only talking about men, only using male writing, I asked about it and neither were annoyed (two instructors from previous courses). They gave me tons more writing from women's perspective… They gave options. This other guy did not give options. He just said, no, this is irrelevant. This doesn't fit. This is not what we are talking about. (Ruth, p. 7, para 2)

Following this episode, within a different discussion, Ruth related that her attempts to create dialogue around a particular issue through questioning, were not well received. As she states,

> I was asking a million questions, and he finally said, he e-mailed me and said: why are you asking all these questions? You are just looking for a fight. I said it is called debate. I want to understand. I want to get into it. Let's talk about this. He didn't want to do it. So,

that is pretty well what it was. I was asking questions he did not want to answer… And in that classroom basically if people said what the professor wanted to hear he was happy. And I noticed, and I did a count on this, he responded mainly to male students, not to female students. (Ruth p. 7, para 2; p. 8, para 6)

Ruth was resisting this exclusion of women's experiences. And for her, debate and dialogue around issues must include voices of diversity and difference, and to ask the questions, what or who is included, what is not, and why.

For Janet, online learning events revealed important ways in which gender, and gender roles and stereotypes have shaped her engagement and her relation to others. In terms of participation, she feels that within a discussion she can interject where appropriate, although she believes that she is "not expected to be the one carrying the conversation" (Janet, p. 8, para 6). In terms of where she feels she fits in within the community of learners, Janet relates that she is somewhat of an outsider, and that her most important contribution to the group is being a "cheerleader". "Being the cheerleader, that is what I like to do, encourage people. I might express a different opinion, but I like to think I am helping them to contribute by creating an environment that I would like to be in. One that people respect me, and are cheering me on to try and contribute to the group" (Janet, p. 11, para 7). And, her beliefs about appropriate and proper behavior also dictate who she connects with within a discussion, who she avoids, and who she is comfortable interacting with.

I feel more comfortable interacting with women online. And, the gay men that I've encountered, I like interacting with them as well. That sounds pretty judgemental doesn't it…The women because maybe I think they will be less judgemental, and that I would have more in common with them. And it is safe, because if I do decide I don't want to get to know them more, I don't have to, but if I do, I can. And, there have only been a couple of gay men that I've encountered in the online learning environment, but they just bring a

different perspective… They are a social group that gets targeted for a lot of things, and are distanced from a lot of people.

What is it about straight men that you think makes you more uncomfortable in an online interaction?

I'm not quite sure. It would take a lot more time for me to get to know them, because they are completely different from me. I am married, but to be frank, I just don't care to get to know them. That probably sounds bad, but I am just going to be honest here… If I were in a face to face class, I feel more comfortable being a married woman, talking to other women and gay men than I would a straight man.

Why?

You don't know how others will interpret why you are interacting with them. And, maybe it does come into play in the online learning environment because sexuality does come into play when you are in a face to face class. I wouldn't want anyone to think I was spending time with them because I was interested in them. So, to avoid that, you just don't interact with them very much. Probably online it would be the same thing for me. Or, maybe that is why I am less inclined to get to know males in the class, heterosexual males.

(Janet, p. 10, para 1-10)

In relation to perceived gender differences within online interactions, Janet also believes that for men, communications are "less personal, even though they talk about personal things. It is more to the point I guess" (Janet, p. 10, para 7).

The testimonies of these women, and how they negotiated these discourses of gender, of competence, and of difference; revealed very interesting and important insights into their ongoing constructions of self, and of their subjectivities. Following is a further discussion of this negotiation, of the nature of participation and connection within the online forums, along with an identification of how power operates and the workings of control in this online context.

Discourses of Connection, Control, and Conflict

For all these women, participation within the discussion forums was mandatory, with marks awarded for participation. Guidelines were also given concerning what constituted the minimum level of engagement required for each discussion topic within the course. Within a typical course, the requisite was to respond three times, once with an answer to the discussion question, along with a response to at least two other contributions. Marks awarded were typically 15 percent of the final grade. Suggestions to follow for effective dicussion are outlined in the University website for Moodle training. Amy describes the level of expectation required in the course she is now enrolled in as follows:

> There are three questions; you have to respond to each of these questions. And she's got a rubric around what a good response is. You can't just say "oh, that is a really good idea". You have to actually have a good critical response. And then you have to respond to two other learners, questions or answers. She looks very specifically for those…You see you have to respond to each question in a meaningful way. And then you have to respond to two other learners' answers in a meaningful way. And that is how she marks you on your participation. (Amy, p. 5, para 11, 13)

Connection

Required participation within the discussion forums was an important factor in the decisions to engage with others, although the amount and level of engagement was influenced by the connections made with others, a sense of obligation felt toward others, the general tenor of the discussions, and individual subjectivities.

Amy relates that "there were a couple of times where I was really not interested at all in the topic that was being discussed, but because it is marked and I have to participate I

would luckily think of something but I knew it really wasn't that good. But, I had to put something in there because I'm getting marked for it (Amy, p. 8, para 4). And, for the most part, Amy's participation just met the requirements with the exception of two courses: One where the class was divided into smaller groups, and the other where the evaluation process was pass/fail and where specific guidelines for participation did not exist.

> I found there was a lot more motivation from the group because we were actually grouped together. So there were four or five of us and we had to create a project or we had to post every day and so there was a little pressure. The other group members would notice, and they would notice if you were not there. In the course I am taking now, no one would really notice. My prof would notice, but I don't think the students would really notice if I wasn't there. So, that made a difference, to motivate me when they are on there. An expectation from the other learners that I would be there. (Amy, p. 4, para 7)

When Amy felt a closer connection to other learners, as in this grouped study course, she felt a greater obligation to others to commit to participation. And, this commitment carried through to further courses when learners from this group were enrolled in her courses. To them she felt a greater connection, and thus obligation for engagement. Interestingly, she also participated more in the pass/fail course that held less prescribed rules for participation and marks.

> I found actually that I participated a lot more in the pass/fail course than I did in one that is prescribed. One that said "you have to respond to three, and you have to respond to two". And I found with pass/fail all of us were engaged in an ongoing discussion, and I posted a lot more… It was just pass/fail, but there were expectations. In the course outline it stated, here are the expectations, that you will participate. So you don't know what is the cut off. You don' t know what the mark is, so I found myself participating a lot more. (Amy, p. 8, para 6,8)

Janet also describes a different sense of obligation to others within a smaller group. As she relates "the one class that we have with only five people, if people don't contribute, it is very evident" (Janet, p. 8, para 2). And, although she describes the online forums

as "supportive, reassuring, welcoming and interactive" (p. 8, para 2)., she also describes herself

as "on the outskirts" (p. 8, para 6) in terms of fitting in; and can feel intimidated under some

circumstances. She shares that,

> having an actual interactive conversation, especially if it is something emotionally charged
> for me, I get pretty worked up about contributing to it. I'm not saying that I get all angry
> or anything like that, but having to express my opinions in front of people, I get a little bit
> intimidated by that. (Janet, p. 9, para 1)

Janet also discussed feelings of intimidation in her first experiences interacting in the online

forums, which led to an eventual disengagement from the discussions, and a temporary

disengagement from the program as previously discussed. She relates the following,

> there was a woman in one of the forums and she wanted to prove that she was smarter than
> everybody else. So, you put up your take on something, and as soon as you did it was kind
> of shot down. So, specifically no, but I do remember there was one woman in particular
> that intimidated me in terms of what she was able to say, and what her opinions on what I
> was saying were" (Janet, p. 6, para 2).
>
> *Did that change your participation?*
>
> Oh, absolutely. I did not participate. And, a lot of what I did participate in was because we
> had to post a minimum, just like now, three times a week, or three times per unit. And,
> you just put down your one liner and that was it. You needed to have an answer for the
> question that week and post it. And that was it. I wouldn't go back and join in any
> discussion. (Janet, p. 6, para 4, 6)

Diana also expressed feeling intimidated within the online forums, and as stated

previously, this is a renewed stage for her at the outset of every course as she negotiates her

position within the group. In terms of participation, she shares the following:

> At the outset when I'm kind of feeling my way through, at that point I am a little more
> hesitant and reserved. But, as time moves on, once I've have a sense of how the course is
> going, I am more willing to share myself. I am pretty open about my thoughts. And of
> course when you are asked a question, you have to respond to the question basically, your

evidence, your facts, what you've read or what have you. So, I do exactly what I am supposed to do. And, I will add opinion, and thought and feeling, but like I said, I just don't like revealing too much personally, like what is going on with your son, or what is going on with your husband. And I think, because you just don't know who is here. Everybody in the group could be lovely, wonderful people, but I don't know that for sure… I think I am leery of online conversation… Common sense is what it comes down to, and if you are online and you are in a course, conversing with people, just try and use common sense. Think about what you should say, and what you shouldn't say, and how much about yourself you should be revealing. (Diana, p. 11, para 10, 12; p. 12, para 1)

Diana was very cautious with her engagement in the ongoing discussions, and preferred not to share too much, and she gauged her participation by what others were saying, the tenor of the discussions, the diversity of opinions, and whether there was conflict.

Karen related a story within her present course where the students, as she states "do not correspond well" (p. 1, para 18). She found this particularly frustrating, although she believes the lack of participation may be related to the fact that it is a small group. Interestingly for others, a smaller group has led to a greater sense of obligation and commitment to dialogue, yet for her the story is quite different.

Here is an example: you had to do a presentation, I did one presentation on one reading. You had to do a breakdown of the reading and then put some questions in. And, I did it and nobody responded. Nothing. I think I got one person the next week. And that seems to be a standard thing with them. It's too small a group, so I think people are a little nervous… Because it's a small group and because it's easier to put your ideas out when it's a bigger group, because there's more ideas floating around. So, yours doesn't get all the attention… I was irritated, probably more than anything because I put a lot of work into it. And it was sort of just, oh well... I mean I got the next week when we were already on the next discussion I got one person making a relatively simplistic response. (Karen, p. 1 para 20; p. 3, para 8)

Ruth also related a story about one course where she felt the participation, engagement, and level of commitment did not meet her expectations. For Ruth this occurred in the course where conflict was already an issue.

> I had one course last semester which was surprising, but in a very negative manner. Every course that I've taken to date, except for the one course last semester, and the one I just did where I said the class participation was non-existant. I had expectations that would be dialogue, and interaction, and intercourse, and it would be really happening. And it has for most of the courses, but I had one, which is a really strange one for it to happen to me because it was a creative writing course. And, it was dreadful. (Ruth, p. 6, para 8)

In both of these courses she experienced a conflict, and surprisingly, stories of conflict within the online forums, was a pervasive theme, shared by most of these women. A typical reaction to this conflict was to disengage from the ensuing dialogue. Following is a more detailed consideration of the stories of conflict shared by these women, and how it was negotiated.

Conflict and Control

Ruth was one of the women who experienced two very personal encounters where conflict took place. In the first episode, she relates the following,

> There was a person in my class that thought I was asking too much and you know, why is that important that sort of thing… At any rate, if I was in class with that person, I might have quit that class. I might have just quit the whole goddamn thing because of that same garbage, but the beauty of it was we ended speaking and she apologized and stuff. It was intense, let's just put it this way. You just ask too many questions and you're always off topic, and la la la. And, I'm thinking this is what the program is about. The professor said the same thing as well in class. And I just preferred it being done in writing as opposed to face to face. I would have been too intense. (Ruth, p. 5, para 1)

Ruth's other experience with conflict happened in a different course, and with her instructor, as highlighted previously. Of interest here is also the way in which these episodes of conflict played

out. In both instances Ruth shares that other students e-mailed her privately about the episode as a show of support, although this was never done in the public spaces. As she relates,

> I'll tell you this. There were two guys in that course who would e-mail me behind the scenes. Lots of people e-mailed me behind the scenes I will tell you. But he would not say anything on the board, in the class. And that frightened me a bit… Even as a University that is supposed to be so open and free and liberating, people cannot say what they want to say in front of each other. That is a scary thing to me. It is the truth, but it is terribly scary… And even the course I took with that young lady, I already figured out, I guessed her age, I guessed everything about her. We ended up meeting and kind of had a laugh about it, but in that class people e-mailed me behind the scenes saying, wow, how could someone say that about you? I thought, why couldn't they say this up front? (Ruth, p. 10, para 1)

Diana also described a troubling experience within one course where a conflict occurred amongst two other students that she believed was sparked by an initial misunderstanding. As she explains,

> Although there is etiquette, online etiquette, there were several instances where people got into rather heated debates online. And, as I was reading the conversations back and forth, I was thinking that this started with a total misinterpretation. But, it was written, so there was no way to judge the nonverbal, the face to face or anything and I think just based on the way it was worded it could have started by reading it one way as opposed to the way it was intended. And so when you see something like that you think, oh, there is the downfall… And it was back and forth until it just became insults. I was really surprised. One particular e-mail started out with, I am really surprised that an educated classroom teacher like yourself could have such useless opinions. And I am thinking oh my god, this is really bad…. I was really surprised though how willing these two people were to fight it out in a discussion page, in front of an entire class. That really surprised me… And they were willing to attack… and you are posting words and you can't take those words back. (Diana, p. 2, para 1, 4; p. 3, para 9, 11)

Following this incident, the instructor for the course reposted the rules of online etiquette,

although, as Diana states, she let them go for awhile" (p. 2, para 4). It was interesting that in this

case, students in the course attempted to gain some measure of resolution albeit, in indirect ways.

As Diana explains, in response,

> And in other forums in different discussions people were indirectly saying things like,
> isn't it great that we all have individual opinions, and things of that nature. And, I thought
> everybody in their own way now is trying to find a way to say, can we all be nice here,
> and value one another, regardless of whether or not we differ in opinion. So, I thought that
> was neat. (Diana, p. 2, para 4)

As a result of this situation, Diana has gained a greater awareness of the ambiguity of language,

and of how easily meaning can be misconstrued, and is more conscious of how she posts. "I

think people really need to think about whether or not, on any message that they post, can be

interpreted in another way. And, I am also conscious of it now whenever post anything. I always

re-read it a few times" (Diana, p. 9, para 4).

Amy shares a similar story of conflict, where an initial misunderstanding became

the impetus for discordant relations. She shares the following,

> In my other course there were some people who got into some very serious online
> arguments, because somebody misunderstood something that they wrote. See this is the
> problem with writing. You are missing the eye contact, the body language. You have to
> watch using sarcasm and things like that, people can get really offended, unintentionally.
> We would all watch this argument happen, this online argument. And I kind of stay out of
> it. But I would read the posts back and forth and you would just see people responding
> very emotionally. And the more they responded emotionally, the more spelling mistakes
> and errors they would make. And you could almost feel the intensity of that discussion.
> And then they worked it out, but it started, it was really interesting to sort of watch. (Amy,
> p. 10, para 12)

Sophie recalled an experience in one course where another student misinterpreted an argument she was making in the online forum. For her this was a source of great concern and embarrassment.

> I wondered, if he misunderstood that posting, did everybody misunderstand it? It was my first or second class. I was a little bit embarrassed that maybe other people were saying, this girl is a psycho. What's the matter with her? I felt like defending myself. I'm not wrong, you just didn't understand what I was trying to say. (Sophie, p. 11, para 2)

For Sophie, representing herself, and being seen by others in a particular way, was a very important consideration, that was perhaps more evident once a sense of misrepresentation came to light. As highlighted previously, conflict within the context of these online discussions can create feelings of anxiety, and can also lead to acts of exclusion by others when the nature of interactions are identified by others as existing outside the norms of appropriate behavior, as will be discussed in the ensuing chapter.

For the women in this study, discourses of conflict along with discourses of difference, competence, and gender played a critical role in the ways in which their identity constructions and subjectivities were shaped. An exploration of these four discourses brings to light an entire history that speaks to how education, and our understandings of educated subjects, have evolved in particular ways; how advances in computer technology have changed the contexts and experiences of learning, and the ways in which we understand ourselves; of the ways difference, as it relates to our positioning with others, plays a role in how we construct our subjectivities; of the way normality, and its limits, are understood; of how gender and what it means to be gendered have permeated our discourses and our consciousness; and of how mechanisms of power and control operate to normalize behavior. A discussion of these ideas and the aforementioned discourses follows.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

"Discourse is not a language or a text but a historically, socially, and institutionally specific structure of statements, terms, categories, and beliefs" (Scott, 1988, cited in St. Pierre, 2000, p. 485),where the rules of its functioning go beyond language and the way in which it is used, to dictate also our actions, and thoughts. And in this way, it becomes unintelligible to act in ways not aligned with established and normalized rules of a particular discourse. Foucault (1980) argues that a discourse has a particular history and logic, and that the emergence of certain discursive themes acts as a form of power. "Discursive practices also included the silences in the discourse as much as they refer to spoken and written words" (Johannesson, 1998, p. 305). Brooks and Edwards (1997) argue that the stories we tell about our lives and our experiences are an important way to make sense of, and integrate the complex and multiple aspects of ourselves, yet in doing so we inevitably include some parts while excluding others that do not fit within the dominant discourses. This process, according to Foucault, is imbued with the workings of power (Brooks & Edwards, 1997). "Our unstoried knowledges can be understood as subjugated in that they have been erased or silenced through the colonization of space by language that stories the dominant knowledges" (Brooks & Edwards, 1997, p. 2). Following is a discussion of what the online learning experiences of these six women revealed about them, their subjectivities, the range of discourses available to them, the possible enactments of self within this context, and the ways in which they resisted or adhered to the dominant discourses in their constructions of self. This discussion will focus on the four

discourses previously identified that influenced these constructions of self: discourses of difference; competence; gender; and conflict, connection, and control.

Discourses of Difference

Discourses of difference within the online discussions played an important role in the way these women came to understand and locate themselves within the online space. Three themes of difference emerged in their stories: existence of an online/face to face binary that privileged the latter; differences between online and face to face learning experiences; and diversity and the awareness this evoked of self as it related to how they were positioned in relation to the 'other'.

Online/Offline Binary

The creation of categorical measures that define educational achievements through mode of delivery, places online experiences within a binary classification system that privileges offline, or traditional learning, over online learning. Online learning experiences then become a 'marked' term, in contrast to the 'unmarked term' of face to face learning. Hall (1996) argues that these types of distinctions operate as a process of exclusion whereby these points of identification become a construction of difference, or of how one is positioned in relation to the other. And these categories work to keep certain individuals out while privileging others. For Janet and Sophie this distinction was revealed as they began their online learning programs. Although they valued their learning experiments, they feared their success and accomplishments would not garner the same level of recognition and status in academia typically awarded to students of more traditional educational systems. As Sophie related, "I don't know whether a

distance education has the same status as a bricks and mortar education" (p. 14, para 9). Most of these women however, preferred traditional learning formats over online study, yet online learning was perceived as the only viable option for pursuing graduate study. The choice to pursue online study for Diana, Amy, Janet and Sophie, was made in the interests of other responsibilities related to family, most importantly, and also to work. Their positions as mothers influenced their subjectivities in very important ways, guiding not only their understandings of themselves and their place in the world, but also the decisions they made related to work and study. These issues will be discussed more thoroughly in a later section, although it is important to highlight here, how this subject position governed their actions and decisions to pursue an educational experience they would not otherwise choose.

Foucault (1983b) writes that the exercise of power consists of a way of structuring the possible forms of conduct of others. In this view, the power relationship recognizes the role of the 'other' as someone who acts. "Basically, power is less a confrontation between two adversaries or the linking of one to the other that a question of government" (Foucault, 1983b, p. 221). Foucault uses the word government here in a broad sense. As he writes, "to govern in this sense is to structure the possible field of action of others" (Foucault, 1983b, p. 221). The possible outcomes and the field of action available to these women was structured in particular ways that limited their choice of study options. There is of course the possibility of resistance, or of choosing to act in different ways, yet, with either resistance or compliance, the act of taking up particular subject positions produces effects, particular subjectivities and ways of acting or being (Weedon, 1987). The forms of subjectivity these women took up within the family, produced certain ways of acting and of understanding their responsibilities, and of what it means to be a woman. As such, their choice to pursue further education was limited in distinct ways. Online

learning allowed the flexibility they required to meet the conflicting demands of their positions as wife, mother, worker, and student, despite their preference for more traditional modes of delivery.

The creation of this distinction between online and offline learning, and of the discourses that surround what it means to be "educated", also has a certain history and needs to be understood as a construction that is produced through relations of power. Following is a brief historical discussion of discourses surrounding what it has meant to be an "educated subject".

A History of the Educated Subject

"Anyone who cannot sing in a choir is not educated" (Laws II 654b, cited in Fendler, 1988, p. 39).

Epistemological shifts throughout history have shaped, and continue to shape discourses and assumptions of what it means to be an educated subject. Although it is important to recognize the productive effects of power, where the exercise of power creates a certain body of knowledge, that in turn produces effects of power (Foucault, 1980). In a "recognition of the productive effects of power in which social relations repeatedly constitute and reconstitute power through subject positions in history, it is useful to remember that no forms of differences— personal, psychological, ethnic, cultural, political, aesthetic—exist in neutral contexts, free of power relations. Therefore categorizations and deviance have always occurred as effects of power" (Fendler, 1988, p. 59). Foucault (1990/1988) urges us to question how certain forms of rationality and regimes of truth have come to be, and to consider the historical conditions and particular interests that have created the nature of the present. A general "politics of truth" within every society dictates what can be distinguished as "true", by whom, and as previously

cited, "the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth" (Foucault, 1980, p. 131).

Fendler (1988) examines several assumptions surrounding what it means to be educated in today's world, and argues that the development of these assumptions embody certain values that define what is normal, and what is not, lending insight into how power has been exercised. In her genealogical examination of the educated subject, she identifies six assumptions that characterize the construction of modern day beliefs about the meaning of being "educated". These assumptions include: educational discourses surrounding the teachability of the subject; that knowledge comes through scientific, secular means; that there are certain procedures associated with becoming educated; that educated subjects possess the capacity for objective reflection; that educated subjects are individualized and identified through categorizations and labeling; and that educated subjects both desire becoming educated and engaging in self-discipline.

That teaching is an essential part of education is widely acknowledged. It is the questions that surround current educational discourse like, what should be taught, and what knowledge should be included, not what are the things that can be taught that dominate this discourse. This of course has not always been the case. Historical musings for instance debated ideas like, what was possible to teach, an example of which was the teachability of virtue. Plato believed an educated subject had a holistic, or complete, nature, and that virtue was something to be cultivated, as it was already a part of a subject's nature. Although, it was also believed that one was born with or without this possibility of becoming educated, hence not obtainable for some people. In his conception, the mind of subjects is already filled with knowledge, but birth casts a veil over the mind. Through questioning, however, experiences could be recalled, and

thus knowledge remembered. Plato also held that because subjects possess different levels of knowledge, education should be divided into classes which correspond to this innate nature and ability (Frost, 1989). In contrast, a Socratic notion held that in accordance with a technology of didactics, virtue could be 'taught' (Fendler, 1988), and that knowledge was obtained through an extraction of differences, and a discovery of essentials upon which all subjects could agree (Frost, 1989). Aristotle held that the aim of education was to cultivate virtue, and like Plato, saw the importance of education for training good citizens (Frost, 1989). Today it is assumed that individuals are 'teachable', and that they also possess individual characteristics influencing teachability, like, 'learning style', and 'developmental stage'. In Greek and Roman times, it was believed that 'truth' and 'knowledge' came from God or a god. And it was not until scientific study of the subjective self, that epistemological questions were asked like, "what are the mechanisms by which an individual subject can know?" (Fendler, 1988, p. 45). Modern educational discourses also assume that subjects have the faculty of cognition, which stands apart from other faculties like "affect" and "behavior". Descartes' contributed to this modern notion of cognition with his assertion that thinking is a process that can be abstracted from the body. "Descartes did not construct rationality as an object of education. Descartes constructed rationality as constitutive of the educated subject. 'I am rationality, and rationality is me.' The technologies of the educated subject shifted from devotional practices that emphasized the distinction between True and the False" (Fendler, 1988, p. 46). However, for Descartes, the production of knowledge by educated subjects could still be attained, and validated by subjective means, including dreams, and beliefs about educated subjects continued to support notions of transcendence and indisputable knowledge claims. Eventual shifts in the conception of the

subject moved from a "transcendent godly self to the principled, rational self" (Fendler, 1988, p. 47).

Modernity characterized a shift from the educated subject of the Enlightenment as beliefs about the subjective knowing self as an object of study began to take hold. Immanuel Kant provided compelling work that contributed to this rupture from notions of the Enlightenment. Kant began to move questions from what was seen, to how our perceptions of seeing and knowing occur, and to question the transcendence of the subject and to view the subject as an object of study. "The taken for granted subject could no longer be taken for granted. The Enlightenment subject as tabula rasa or naivete was replaced by a modern a priori objective consciousness" (Fendler, 1988, p. 48), and the emergence of new kinds of subjectivity took hold where the educated self became the researcher and the researched. This shift was critical for providing early formulations of the objectification of the subject, along with a shift in sovereign power to a disseminated and subjective exercise of power. Because perceptual faculties of the subject were questioned, dreams and other subjective knowledges had no validity. "This is the shift that defined 'subjective knowledge' to mean 'invalidated opinion' and 'objective knowledge' to mean 'validated truth'"(Fendler, 1988, p. 48). Along with this investigation of an objectified self, modernity also identified subjects in terms of their relationship to society. It was within this context that issues of difference, of the social roles of individuals, and of rights emerged; along with historical shifts that saw the increasing influence of statistics and of psychological self-discipline. This idea, of the social role of the individual, has become widely embedded in our discourses, and institutions, and social categories, debated in modernity, are now taken for granted statistical "truths".

Outcomes of these shifts also saw the identification of educated subjects through statistically defined attributes like race, and gender; that subsumed other attributes like affect, cognition, personality, and perceptual faculties. This led to the construction of knowledge as a production understood in terms of these statistical categories, and where the individual was constructed as a representation of these categories. Another important change in how subjects were seen to be constituted was within a shift in the locus of power from an exterior, sovereign power, to a power of self-government and self-discipline (Fendler, 1988).

> The rationalizing capacities of the discipline of psychology made self-governance an aspect of the educated subject. Thenceforth, the educated subject was identified according to psychological capacities, mediated by expert knowledge, and regulated in terms of social institutions. In these circumstances the power to be self-governing was simultaneously the discipline to be psychologically normal…The subject is recognized as 'educated' and 'civilized' precisely because of its 'self-discipline'. Conversely, the subject, insofar that it is constituted as not self-disciplined, is regarded as 'uncivilized' and 'uneducated'. (Fendler, 1988, p. 52-53)

Our beliefs of what constitutes an educated subject; of what is teachable, to whom; and of what and how teaching should take place, exist as a result of the productive effects of power. In higher education today, beliefs about what it means to be educated continue to bolster traditional face-to-face learning, and to devalue less traditional, online learning formats. Sophie's and Janet's experiences support this notion, and highlight the enduring stigma surrounding online delivery systems. As Sophie relates, "once I was on a panel and somebody did say about a fellow who had a Masters through distance, that it just didn't seem that he had the validity of someone who had done the rigours of the classroom" (p. 14, para 1l). And Janet shares the following, "there is a stigma around doing an online graduate program. It is not highly regarded" (p. 11, para 9). Even with advances in computer technology that have given rise to the

creation of very unique learning contexts that can support and maintain interactions on a global

scale, something not conceivable when modern ideals of the educated subject were formed,

online learning continues to be viewed as an inferior alternative.

The Privileging of Face to Face Education

Since its inception, online and distance education have held marginal status within

higher education, and have been subjected to negative attitudes that claim online learning is

inferior to traditional learning, and that it lacks academic rigor and credibility (Yick, Patrick, &

Costin, 2005). The experiences of both Sophie and Janet support these findings, and the beliefs

of the subordinate status online learning holds in higher education. Resistance to this form of

learning by faculty continues to pervade educational discourses. Online education challenged

prevailing notions that dictate appropriate places for instruction, and method of delivery; and the

acceptance of these assumptions embodies certain values that privilege traditional land-based

learning, by defining this experience as 'normal', and the alternative, distance delivery, as

'abnormal' (Folker, 2005; Yick et al., 2005).

In Folker's (2005) and Yick et al.'s (2005) discussion of the resistance to online

learning by faculty in higher education, they found that the incorporation of technology and

unfamiliar contexts can create feelings of discomfort with using this technology, although,

understanding this resistance must also consider how online learning challenges existing

processes of power and control in higher education. There is, as Yick et al. demonstrate, an

important interplay between prevailing attitudes of online education amongst faculty and

administration, and historical and current notions of the philosophy of education, of distance

education, and of the values and assumptions within the culture of higher education. "The

academic culture of higher education institutions is characterized by specific pedagogical philosophies, assumptions about rewards and incentives, and values about how teaching is delivered" (Yick et al., 2005, p. 1). In Yick et al.'s study, the perceptions and experiences of faculty with online learning within a traditional higher education institution, or "brick and click" institution, that incorporates traditional and online components, were explored. Faculty members participated in an online asynchronous discussion of the perceptions of teaching and of the role of research in distance education. Findings showed that negative attitudes toward distance education persisted, and were based on beliefs of the less credible and incommensurable quality of online learning compared to traditional classroom based education. As one faculty participant stated, "it is a quality control issue since some traditional faculty still perceive that online education is 'diluting the status of higher education'" (Yick et al., 2005, p. 7). This sense that distance education holds less credibility was believed to stem from fear, and from a lack of understanding and knowledge about online learning; a sense of elitism dominating many traditional institutions, where changes brought about by technological advancements may jeopardize jobs; and with the lasting, negative images of correspondence courses within distance education. One faculty member normalized these negative attitudes as typical reactions to technological advancements that challenge the status quo. He noted, "the University where I received my PhD, there was much resistance to online teaching by faculty members in my department…they are most afraid of what will happen to them in terms of their status. Change is sometimes painful" (Yick et al., 2005, p. 8). Janet also shares an experience that highlights these negative views of, and resistance to online education by faculty members. She relates the following, "a family member of mine, he is an instructor at a University and when I told him what I was doing, he said, 'Oh why would you do that? You are wasting your money. All they do

is take your money and leave the students to flounder" (p. 11, para 13). Janet believes that this thinking is the result of not only a lack of understanding of the nature of online learning today, but is also a resistance to change. As she relates, "I know that if these people tried to do an online course they wouldn't be able to do it. They may be a little bit older so it would be difficult for them to accept change and accept the fact that this is really going to be the future (p. 11, para 13).

Measures of credibility were also an important concern identified by the faculty members in Yick et al.'s study. Three such measures included: large enrollments; accreditation; and scholarship and research, that when present, lend a sense of greater credibility to institutions. In addition, online education challenges the traditional relationships between students and faculty, where faculty are seen to be the transmitters of knowledge, to a shift that sees greater learner control. This shift in learner control challenges the notion of an educated subject theorized in modernity, that saw constitution of an educated subject as mediated by "experts" and "expert knowledge".

The nature of online learning materials also allows for increased visibility, and instant access to course materials by administration, thus providing the possibility of greater administrative control over content (Folkers, 2005). However, "the potential for greater scrutiny and supervision of course content by administration is seen by many administrators as justifiable and appropriate; the greater potential for control and even censorship by higher education administration is seen by faculty members as a strong threat to academic freedom" (Folkers, 2005, p. 70). Negative attitudes and resistance to online learning continue to permeate educational discourses, although, Yick et al. (2005) argue that over time change is inevitable. Recent trends showing increasing enrollments in online contexts, the incorporation of online

components within traditional institutions, and our use of computer technology in all aspects of our daily lives, are creating a very different educational and cultural climate.

For the women in this study, enduring stigmas that position online learning as an inferior alternative, marginalizes these women in many different ways. The stereotyping of these women's aspirations and identity constructions, already limits the choices and alternatives available to them, and stigmatizing online learning programs works to maintain their exclusion and marks their success and accomplishments as inferior. For these women, the ways they defined their competence also shaped not only their positions within the learning group, but also within the context of graduate study, and within this program. These ideas will be explored in greater detail in a later section, although what is important to recognize here is the ways in which exclusion and marginalization operate within this context. For example, many of these women believed they were not good enough for the program, as evidenced by their feelings of incompetence; yet, for Janet and Sophie, once they achieved a certain measure of competency or success, the program was not perceived as good enough by some within their social and professional spheres; and other viable options for study were limited by the stereotyping of their roles, responsibilities, and ambitions.

Online Learning: A Unique Educational Landscape

Communications technologies and biotechnology are the crucial tools recrafting our bodies. These tools embody and enforce new rules for social relations for women worldwide. Technologies and scientific discourses can be partially understood as formalizations, i.e., as frozen moments, of the fluid social interactions constituting them, but they should also be viewed as instruments for enforcing meanings. (Haraway, 1991, p. 164)

Advances in communications technologies have created unique contexts for learning and for making meaning, where the possibility exists for connecting with others on a global scale (Turkle, 1995; Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2005). The Internet has transformed the ways we think, connect with others, form communities, and ultimately the ways that we construct our subjectivities (Turkle, 1995), and that serves as a space where the possibility exists for constructing multiple identities (Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2005). Connections with others within this virtual space created a very different context for learning for the women in this study, and for constructing their sense of self, and their subjectivities. In the practice of making themselves up within this learning context, however, they are confined by the particular discourses available to them. In asking the question of how we come to understand ourselves, our subjectivities, Foucault (1994) writes that subjects develop knowledge of themselves through specific techniques, or "technologies" that are aligned with certain kinds of domination, and that also implies certain kinds of training, modification, and the acquisition of particular skills and attitudes. Each of these technologies represent a "matrix of practical reason" (Foucault, 1994, p. 225). These technologies, as defined by Foucault (1994) are:

> (1)technologies of production, which permit us to produce, transform, or manipulate things; (2) technologies of sign systems, which permit us to use signs, meanings, symbols, or signification; (3) technologies of power, which determine the conduct of individuals and then submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject; (4) technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (p. 225)

The last two technologies, those of domination and of the self, represent important ways in which individuals in society are governed. Discipline represents one obvious way in which the

governing of individuals in society operates, yet the techniques of the self, and the way we choose to act upon ourselves, to govern ourselves, our actions and our thoughts, represents another effective means of governance. Through their interactions with others, and through their participation in the discourses available to them, the women in this study practiced making themselves up in particular ways, and performing acts of self governance.

For Janet and Karen, the experience interacting in an online context created a greater sense of confidence and competence, where their performance as students took on positions of valuable contributor, successful student, and for Karen, as skilled debater and discussion initiator .

Karen's new found sense of confidence was a result of her experiences engaging in these virtual learning spaces. For her, cultural discourses and practices framing relationships during her time spent in Saudi Arabia had lasting effects on her constructions of self. The relationships, and the possibilities for participation within the discourses available to her were largely governed by gender roles that dictated proper behavior and also ways of thinking. And, as Foucault argues, through the normalization of these socially constructed rules of discourse, alternatives become unintelligible (St. Pierre, 2000). Karen described herself as "not vocal" (p. 12, para 11) in contexts and with individuals outside of her immediate family. As she related, "thirty years living in Saudi Arabia, surrounded by men that you don't argue with under any circumstances, just puts a whole different nuance on how you interact with people" (p. 12, para, 3). However, the opportunity to connect with others in a virtual space provided a safe context for her to explore alternative ways of being, where no one would "ever say she was stupid". These findings support Harvey's (2009) claims of an increased sense of empowerment and feelings of confidence amongst learners given the belief in a certain degree of anonymity within these

discussions. Karen also took up subject positions within this virtual space that positioned her in more authoritative and powerful ways. She came to appreciate the value of her experiences and her knowledge, and of her ability to be situated as one who is intelligent. Within the discursive field of the family, and in contexts outside of this educational arena, however, she continued to position herself in more marginally and to conduct herself in ways more aligned with traditional ways of being. Although, it is important to remember that the ways we position ourselves is ongoing, and continually shifting in our interactions with others, and that through these interactions we are also subject to certain positions that others would put upon us (Davies, 2000). Within the context of her family, since returning to Canada, it appears that the ways in which others position her has not changed significantly, nor has the ways in which she positions herself within this context.

Janet shared that her proficiency and skillfulness adapting to new communication technologies and her success learning in a virtual context has been profoundly empowering. And, although she shared stories of discrimination related to the identification of online learning as second rate in comparison to traditional learning contexts, she believes that she is becoming highly adaptable and able to cope with technological and scientific changes that are part of the future. How she experienced and constructed her identity changed fundamentally given the ways in which she was able to link with a variety of discourses in virtual spaces, and gain competence negotiating these complex linkages. Of interest here, however is the conflict that exists between her own sense of accomplishment, skill, and success as an online learner, and the position she takes within her family relative to her studies. As an example, she states that "I think it takes a lot of maturity to be part of something like this. It is not worth it to argue or to discuss it with him, but that is where he comes from. He is a professor at a University and his opinion of it isn't

very good" (Janet, p. 11, para 13). She believes that her learning experiences in this virtual

context are valuable, credible, requiring skill, expertise and knowledge, however, within her

interactions with this member of her family, her choice is to remain silent when the credibility of

this learning experience is challenged. His status as a professor at a University embodies a

certain kind of position that implies a level of authority and status that is regarded as inherently

more consequential than other positions. As a member of this more dominant discursive

community, his attitudes and beliefs, and his understanding of the world, and of the educational

system are considered more "true" than other divergent views. In this particular instance, it was

Janet's choice to accept her position as one who is subordinate to the position of authority that he

claimed.

Diana, Janet, and Karen felt that in general, the discussion boards were more

open, honest, and less judgmental. Harvey's (2009) work suggests that a sense of empowerment

is the result of students' capacity to hold onto the determination of self-disclosure, and of

defining oneself. There was also choice; choices among engaging with various discourses, of

who to interact with, along with choices in what to include. For example, Diana relates that she

liked that "sometimes we can just post our ideas and walk away" (p. 2, para 1). For these women,

however, the way in which they constructed and reconstructed their subjectivities often happened

in conflicting and complex ways. At times they described their elevated feelings of competence,

confidence, and empowerment within their engagements, although the alternatives were also

evident. Feelings of incompetence, and a lack of confidence and thus commitment were also

revealed, where their identifications in relation to others placed them in marginal positions. Their

identity constructions were often fractured in ways wherein their perception of self was not as

coherent as they believed it to be. For example, for many of these women, the diversity of the

learning group was exalted as providing a valuable and rich learning environment, although they also expressed discomfort and decreased engagement in discussions where this diversity was evident. This somewhat contradictory view may suggest a desire to represent themselves in socially desirable ways. For instance, claiming to value and accept diversity in the learning group is an acceptable and respected viewpoint. Actual engagement and interaction with others in a diverse learning context, however, creates a very different context for understanding ourselves and for constructing our subjectivities , as evidenced by their unease and disengagement. Their (re)positioning within this context is influenced by relations of power where some subject positions are more privileged than others. Barrett (2005) explains that

> Positioning is constantly being negotiated and shifts from moment to moment as we interact. The cultural narratives or discourses to which we have access, make certain subject positions available, and others unaccessible. With each utterance or action, we take up particular subject positions within or in relation to the discourses that are available. (p. 84-85)

Understanding how subjectivities are constructed within a diverse group of learners must recognize the marginalization of certain groups and of the different positionings that are available to certain groups. For these women, their action to disengage, along with their feelings of discomfort, speak to how their subjectivities placed them in marginal ways, and that created uncertainty around how they could negotiate alternative positions that could be more authoritative and influential. It is also important to remember in such an argument that platitudes that suggest a virtual learning context allows equitable participation for all, can lead to the privileging, reproduction, and legitimization of a dominant order.

Along with this diversity, openness and honesty in this virtual context was hailed as an important and beneficial feature of these interactions. For Diana, however, this stance also revealed inconsistencies and contradictions. For example, she shared that she appreciated the

opportunity to just post her ideas and walk away, yet she was also very concerned with how others perceived her. Her story also revealed that while she appreciated the openness and honesty within the online space, she also felt that at times participants were too honest, or shared too much. Within these online discussions, openness and honesty were hailed by a number of participants as a valuable and desirable characteristic of the interactions in this space, although, as Diana related, "there is a line you can cross" (p. 10, para 11) in terms of what, and how much is shared, and the appropriateness of too much disclosure. And, although Diana viewed these characteristics in a positive and advantageous light, she was careful not to "reveal too much" about herself personally and was "open and honest only as it applied to the course" (p. 10, para 11).

For many of the other women, openness and honesty, when it led to conflict of opinions, also created tension, as will be explored in a later section. Our ways of being, and our ways of integrating the complex ways we construct our subjectivities, inevitably excludes certain elements. Brooks and Edwards (1997) argue that it is these unstoried elements that are not a part of the dominant discourses and their implied rules of conduct, and of thought that are neglected. A dominant discourse can be understood as "a particular language, a distinctive worldview in which some things are regarded as inherently more important or true than others, a set of concepts that are held in common by those participating in discourse, rules for judging what is good or bad (acceptable or inappropriate) contributions, and procedures that are applied to determine who may be allowed to join the discourse community" (Brookfield, 2001, p. 10).

The interactions that happen in these online spaces, however, also allow time and space for reflection and consideration that, for Ruth, provided a safe place to dialogue. As she related, "online you are not in the same intense spaces, you are not breathing the same air" (p.

13, para 12). Yet, research also suggests that the "anonymity" believed to be present within these spaces is a myth, that identities are often betrayed, and that even with choice as an option our portrayals can unconsciously depict a social identity (Blake, 2000), and as with the label 'English teacher' in Amy's story, social stereotyping may also operate. How we negotiate our subjectivities must also consider the broader historical, social, and institutional contexts in which our participation takes place, and their production through relations of power (Hall, 1996; Wenger, 1998).

For these women, how they came to understand themselves and how they constructed their subjectivities in this online space was a negotiation of difference where an awareness of the other and where they were located in relation to the other, defined their particular subject positions.

Diversity and Difference

Hall's (1996) definition of identity highlights the importance of difference in its construction, and the workings of power and exclusion, where identity is seen as a construction of difference, and of how one is positioned in relation to others, and where certain subject positions hold more privilege than others. Zipin (1998) argues that "more or less unconsciously, each person actively embodies subjective dispositions for sensing (1) 'self' as distinct from 'others' within a complex identity nexus (2) one's centrality or marginality in relation to rules of ethics and perception that define 'normal' self norms that are partial historical constructions of 'truth', passed off as timeless universal verities; and (3) styles of behavior that it is one's distinctive 'nature', as a raced, sexed, classed, or otherwise identified subject, to perform in

relation to dominant norms" (p. 316). As a temporary connection to certain subject positions, identity is always becoming, defined and redefined with discursive practices (Hall, 1996).

For the women in this study, the diversity of the learning group, and the awareness of difference, and of the 'otherness' of others, was significant in its influence on their constructions of self.

Diana

Diana experienced a recurring stage of determining where she saw herself fitting within the course, and of where she saw herself positioned in relation to others. For her, this awareness of others and of difference determined how she defined and located herself, and what her role was within the group. The diversity of the learning group brought also a wide range of backgrounds and perspectives that at times let to an adoption of a more secondary position. As she relates, "there are times in these courses where I may feel a little intimidated…I just kind of sat back" (p. 6, para 6). When she felt she lacked the experience and background that others had, she withdrew somewhat from the discussions, engaging only after she had the opportunity to reflect on the contributions of others. Her role here was not a central one.

Sophie

Sophie also gauged her conceptions of self, and her identifications through difference. As a "science person", she identifies herself as different from others within the program, in both thought and in manner of being. This difference was exhibited quite clearly within the discussion forums, as she related, "I was terrified of posting in the forum because I was reading the language people would use, and I am thinking, I don't know any of this stuff" (p.

4, para 4). Given her background, Sophie felt her language was "straightforward" and "simplistic" compared to that of the other students, and that she lacked experience in debating ideas for in science there "are not a lot of grey areas", and in chemistry for example, "the formulas work, or they don't" (p. 4, para 4). And, she found the experiences and backgrounds of the other students to be a source of intimidation, most markedly in the beginning of the program. As she gained more experience within the program, and achieved success in completing courses, her confidence increased and she came to accept her own writing and personal style. Yet, this diversity continued to play an important role in here conceptions of self, and in her decisions about who to interact with, and who to avoid. Not surprisingly, she related that she shied away from engaging with learners with whom she had little in common. And while she valued the rich experience of learning from this diversity, there were learners with whom she felt there existed such a large gap or difference in terms of background and knowledge that engagement became too difficult. For instance, there was one classmate in particular that she related "scared me to death…there is no way that I could compete with a mind like that…you are too scary for me. I don't know all these things" (p. 10, para 3). The nature of these text-based communications also present challenges in terms of communicating effectively and portraying authentically one's original intent, for without visual cues and voice inflection, messages must rely solely on text to impart meaning. And, the permanence and the lingering quality of these messages creates a very different context in which one constructs identity. As Sophie recounts, an assertion of hers that was misunderstood by a fellow student became the source of embarrassment and of concern. The fact that this interaction was potentially viewed by the entire class was worrisome, as she felt others may also misconstrue her meaning, but more importantly that they would view her as a "psycho", or that something "was the matter with her." And, as McConnell (2002) explored, two

important variables influencing the construction of identity are through a recognition of the expertise of others, and also of judgments made by others of one's work, for it is within our experiences of engagement within a community that helps define who we are and our way of being.

Janet

Janet's understanding of self shifted dramatically since her first experiences engaging in the online discussion forums, and like Sophie and Diana, she also defined her notions of self through difference and how she saw herself positioned in relation to others. Beginning the program, Janet's identification of self incorporated characterizations of being "young" and "inexperienced", which created difficulties for her relating to other more mature students in the forums. And, unlike these more mature students who she viewed as "worldly, smart and experienced", she identified herself as "not very worldly, dumb and inexperienced". This marked distinction between these two identifications illustrates how in the constructions of identity, difference creates the possibility for exclusion (Hall, 1996). For, after this initial experience, Janet chose not to register for another course for a period of five years. Since returning she relates that she feels more "worldly, experienced" and able to appreciate and value the diversity of the learning group. Janet, however, continued to identify herself and her role in marginal ways, as evidenced by her characterization and identification as "an outsider", and her role as a "cheerleader", or as one who is essentially on the sidelines of the discourse.

Amy

Amy echoes Janet's concern over beginning online study as a young learner given the elements for greater participation and active engagement. Within the online forums, the diversity of the population is a valuable resource for learning although, as she relates, "there is always going to be someone who knows a lot more than you do, and there will always be people who do not have as much life experience, and people who have more" (p. 14, para 12). Amy also expressed concern over labeling herself as an English teacher as she felt this identification set her apart from others in a particular way, and that with this distinction the possibility of certain expectations and judgments from others was constructed. It is within this context of diversity and difference that Amy, along with these other women, negotiated their place; and through difference they came to new understandings of themselves.

Karen

Karen came into this program as a more mature student, and interestingly, her identifications as an older student, also set her apart from others. One example was her belief that as part of a different generation, certain communication technologies hold little interest for her, like chat rooms. It was however the rich diversity within the online forums that for Karen provided valuable opportunities for not only understanding different perspectives, but learning from the wide range of experiences of others, and also coming to the realization that she also had a unique perspective and frame of reference that was also valuable and that others could also learn from. It was to her a very enjoyable and liberating experience, and one that validated her knowledge and her perspectives. As she related, "the one thing I learned through all this is to

realize that you do have a perspective, that you do have a frame of reference…It is an obvious part of everything that goes on, even the way people answer and the way they think, and what authors are thinking when they are writing. I've really enjoyed the whole program, but that is one part that has been very good for me" (p.16, para, 2). Karen was aware of difference and of diversity although through this difference she gained a new appreciation for her own lived experience, of her perspective, and of her voice.

Ruth

Ruth also held great appreciation for the diversity and the many voices that existed within the online forums as she found they offered a rare opportunity to hear the voices of others and to open a more inclusive space. For her, the opportunity to hear from young people was a great privilege; it was a privilege to share in their experience, in their unique style of communicating. As she shared, "people assume they would not have the experience, they wouldn't know. You tell me when you were 16 you didn't have experience? You didn't have a voice? You sure did. It was powerful. I love that" (p. 13, para, 4, 6).

For many of these women, however, it was through this identification of difference that led to feelings of doubt, intimidation, and a sense that they lacked significant experience that would be beneficial to the learning community. As a result, for many of these women, decreased participation and decreased feelings of competency were the outcome. Their individual positioning, when faced with others who were unlike them in particular ways, influenced their subjectivities and beliefs about where they fit in within the discourse. Many of these women took on subordinate positions to others in their interactions, most markedly when placed in new groups and in new situations. Their negotiations and their positioning changed

over time, yet, decreased rates of participation and diminished feelings of competence were common. Judgments of their competence were (re)constructed and (re)negotiated through their experiences of connection with others online, and in the judgments they made of the competence of others.

Discourses of Competence

For discourses of competence to come into being, there must also exist the identification of its opposite, incompetence to be made. Incompetence sets the limits of what can be included in defining competence, or normality. Recognition of limits in order to be recognized as such, requires the presence of the discarded or irrelevant (Britzman, 1998). "In educational discourse, for example, one requires the individual who lacks self-esteem in order for the category of self-esteem to be installed into the body. In discourses of science, the homosexual as an identity is required for the heterosexual as an identity to enter the stage of history" (Britzman, 1998, p. 216-217). Exclusion sets limits and defines both what can be included and what cannot. Britzman's (1998) inquiry into the study of limits follows from Foucault's examination of the "structures of thinkability", or regimes of truth that govern what is thinkable within a particular history, and the limits of what can be thought. The production of the concept of competency is an identification that sets itself the definition of a normal, proper subject. For the women in this research, the ways in which they defined their competency was an underlying theme, shaping their constructions of self, their subjectivities, and their locatedness within the group, and within the context of graduate study.

Sophie expressed concern over her ability to be successful in this educational endeavor as she believed that, relative to more competent learners, she lacked significant

background and written fluency. However, it was also the formal judgments made by instructors, in terms of grades awarded, that reflected an important indication of where and how she positioned herself in relation to others. For the first two courses within this program, however, the evaluative measure was pass/fail, and as a result Sophie was ill at ease given her inability to determine her standing, and, it was not until she successfully completed a graded course that she was able to feel "more comfortable" (Sophie, p. 4, para 4). The pass/fail format was an unfamiliar context for learning for Sophie, and one that gave a diminished measure of aptitude, and where the classification provided little information of standing or of excellence. Foucault (1980) argues that the processes of "continuous registration, perpetual assessment and classification" (p. 20), represent an important way in which the technologies of power and discipline disciplinary power operate. Perhaps the most important mechanism of this disciplinary power is the examination.

The Examination

The examination has the "triple function of showing whether the subject has reached the level required, of guaranteeing that each subject the same apprenticeship, and of differentiating the abilities of each individual" (Foucault, 1980, p. 158); and, where the workings of this disciplinary power is also an organizational procedure for controlling space and time. It was, according to Foucault (1980) during the Classical age that attention was drawn to the body as something that could be "manipulated, shaped, trained, which obeys, responds, becomes skillful and increases its power" (p. 136). While this was not the first time in history where the body was controlled, constrained, or coerced, there were distinct and important differences operating here. First was the extent of this control over the body. It was a power exercised at an

individual level, controlling movements, actions, and beliefs. And, the object of this control

became one of economy, of efficiency, and of ordering, and where the supervision was focused

on the processes of this activity, where time, space, and movement were organized, arranged,

and controlled. Space was divided through partitioning, where

> each individual has his [sic] own place; and each place its individual… disciplinary space
> tends to be divided into as many sections as there are bodies or elements to be
> distributed…to be able at each moment to supervise the conduct of each individual, to
> assess it, to judge it, to calculate its qualities or merits. (Foucault, 1980, p. 143)

 In education, students are assigned individual places that allow for supervision, development of

a hierarchy, and the ability to reward certain individuals. This disciplinary power also arranges

and separates time as learning is organized in a sequence of distinct stages, that is finalized with

an examination that can differentiate and classify individuals.

> The examination combines the techniques of an observing hierarchy and those of a
> normalizing judgment. It is a normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to
> qualify, to classify, and to punish. It establishes over individuals a visibility through which
> one differentiates them and judges them. That is why, in all mechanisms of discipline the
> examination is highly ritualized. (Foucault, 1980, p. 184)

For Sophie and Janet, the results of this "final examination", or marks awarded

represent an important way in which they are able to judge their success and that differentiates

and classifies them within a particular group. It was also an important way of gaining validation

and a sense of competency. Throughout their experiences within this program, their feelings of

competency grew as they achieved success and validation through this ritual of examination.

Diana, Janet, Sophie, and Amy also shared concern over their ability to become

competent learners in the context of graduate study. Janet shared that coming from a small

community she did not believe that graduate study was something she would be able to pursue,

and, within her first course she shared that in relation to others she felt "really dumb". Consistent

with poststructural thought, is the notion that we take up certain subject positions available to us within the discourse of our culture. And, through these positions, our agency can be limited as certain positions have differential status, access to certain kinds of knowledge, and available actions. As well, this subjectivity works on both our conscious and unconscious self, on our thoughts and feelings, and in how one makes sense of one's place in the world.

For these women, beliefs about their competence and place within the context of graduate study, was a source of anxiety and angst. They did not begin this program with a strong belief in their abilities to be successful or to possess, as Amy explains, "opinions that may actually be meaningful, and that people may actually learn something from the things I say" (Amy, p. 13, para 7). Yet, as Foucault reminds us, in taking subject positions, it is a problem of what is thinkable: of moving to a discourse where different intelligibilities are possible, and in choosing to resist oppressive forces that limit our freedom. Interestingly, although the women transformed their individual beliefs of competence throughout this program, their actual competencies as students and as users of online technology when they began this program, were likely much higher than their self-assessments reflected. They all achieved success in their educational endeavors prior to admittance to this program, were able to meet the requirements for admission into this graduate program, and were skilled users of online technology. Indeed, for Janet, her expertise and adaptability using online technology was an important factor in her characterization of self, yet her assessment of self, like that of many of these women, revealed contradictions where self-perception gave a false notion of actual accomplishment and skill.

Bruestle et al. (2009) provide very compelling evidence that supports these findings. In their study of gender differences in online learning contexts, women's assessments of personal competencies were lower than the assessments given by men. This finding, however,

appeared inconsistent with other results that revealed little or no significant gender differences in the use and acceptance of computer technology and online learning environments, and in their skill and expertise using online technology. This suggests that individual estimation of competency in learning contexts is a highly gendered subject. For the women in this study, statements that reflected a lack of confidence in personal abilities seems surprising, although this is also supported by earlier research that claims the socialization of gender roles creates differential beliefs about individual capability and confidence. Flannery (2000) for instance, cites evidence that positive self-image and feelings of competency for girls, while high in elementary school, shows a marked decline in high school. For boys, however, high beliefs of competence and capability are maintained throughout high school. Despite the skill these women possessed, and the success they achieved, they continued to question their capability and competence. For Diana, this struggle to define herself as competent was a renewed stage she experienced with every new course, so even her past successes in this program did not carry increased perceptions of competence into successive courses, and she began each course with a diminished perception of ability. I understand these feelings as my own subjectivities and perceptions of competency in learning contexts is usually very dependent upon marks and feedback I receive and, like Diana, my increased feelings of competence are somewhat fleeting as new projects and challenges also raise new doubts, uncertainties, and questions about my capability and merit.

While these women began this program with beliefs that graduate study and online study may not be a context that they could be successful in, or that was a "proper" place for them, they worked on resisting these subject positions and on creating new ways of being, and of defining themselves. In many instances they came to see themselves as capable, competent learners who were well equipped for the demands of graduate education, and who

possessed knowledge and experience that was a valuable contribution to the learning group.

Karen shared that throughout her experiences within this graduate program, she gained

confidence and a "stronger" self-image. Although, these transformations were evident, their

identifications of competence increased, struggles with accepting this identification in every

situation, and in every discussion, continued. Another important way in which these women

defined themselves was through discourses of gender, where these gendered discourses

influenced the very issues addressed here, the roles of motherhood, their beliefs about

appropriate and gendered ways of interacting with others, and in the choices that they made to

act or not to act.

Discourses of Gender

Assumptions about gendered appropriate behavior permeate our discourse and our

consciousness, providing a structure and a way of organizing relationships, dictating also what is

allowable for each of us as gendered subjects (Camussi & Leccardi, 2005; Charlebois, 2011).

Weedon (1987) argues that these discourses, and the ways in which we come to understand and

to give voice to our experience, predate our acquisition of language. These understandings and

the resultant positions with which we identify, produce certain subjectivities.

Brooks and Edwards (1997) exploration of the sexual identity development of

women, the dominant gender narrative identified was that "girls aren't/shouldn't be too bright,

big, tall, good at sports, as free to run around or do as many interesting things as boys, wear

functional clothes, or go without a shirt" (p. 3). Dominant masculine behaviors also include,

"demonstrating authority, control, independence, competitive individualism, aggressiveness, and

the capacity for violence", while feminine behaviors are aligned with "compliance, dependence

on others—particularly men, cooperative ability, and passivity" (Charlebois, 2011, p. 21-22).

The dominant sexual narrative characterized the role of women as married with children, where

other "successful" options did not exist, and where "women are sexual with men [they] use their

sexuality to establish and maintain this relationship, [and] problems conforming with this

narrative are viewed as medical problems requiring either physical or mental health remediation"

(Brooks & Edwards, 1997, p. 3). Sexuality according to Foucault (1990/1978) is one component

in power relations that carries great instrumentality for discipline and regulation. One of these

strategies of knowledge and power is the "hysterization of women's bodies". Foucault

(1990/1978) describes this mechanism as a threefold process "whereby the feminine body was

analyzed, qualified, and disqualified" (p. 104). Women's bodies are imbued with sexuality and

thoroughly medicalized due to beliefs in their inherent pathology, and given the responsibility

women owed to "the health of their children, the solidity of the family institution, and the

safeguarding of society" (Foucault, 1990/1978, p. 147).

Within western culture's history, beliefs about the natural superiority and

dominance of the male sex, and of the fundamentally different natures of men and women have

prevailed. These assumptions originally conceived of in religious terms as a creation of God;

were, after the mid-nineteenth century, premised on scientific terms as a creation of biology and

evolution. Beliefs in this natural superiority of men, however, continue to hold influence in our

discourses and cultural practices, even in light of more recent research on gender and gender

identity that highlights a multifactorial notion of gendered identity (Athenstaedt, 2003), and

understandings that biological differences do not hold a fixed significance beyond its cultural

interpretation or use (Bem, 1993), and poststructural understandings that insist our subjectivities

and understandings of what it means to be male or female, are social and historical productions that serve very particular interests (Weedon, 1987).

Within the construction of gender, the constitution of masculinity or femininity is not determined by biological sex, yet the normative actions and behaviors which they embody, are often judged according to biological distinctions between males and females (Charlebois, 2011). In other words, men are often assessed and held accountable to social behaviors that are considered masculine, and women according to those traits that are considered feminine. This is not to say that men do not, or cannot possess feminine traits, or vice versa, but that they can be held accountable to them, and that sanctioning and marginalization may result from a misalignment between the embodiment of gender or gendered actions, and one's sex category. Within this dichotomy masculinities are valued over subaltern masculinities and femininities (Charlebois, 2011). While acknowledging the existence of historical, situational and cultural variations, hegemonic masculinity is defined as "well-educated, white, middle-class, heterosexual breadwinner" and given the importance relationality plays in the hegemony of masculinity, "non-middle class, non-white, and non-heterosexual men [and femininities] are deemed subordinate to hegemonic masculinity" (Charlebois, 2011, p. 22). Charlebois (2011) argues that gender stereotypes and the reproduction of sex "appropriate" gender behavior creates a hierarchal relationship that both legitimizes and guarantees the superiority and dominance of men. One important way in which hegemony operates and this power is maintained is through a process of consent rather than coercion, where women tolerate, and are convinced to adopt attitudes and accept hierarchal relationships that subordinate their interests (Anderson & Damarin, 1996). "Ascendance to power is contingent upon persuading the populace that asymmetrical gender relations are natural and inevitable" (Charlebois, 2011, p. 22). Charlebois

(2011) contends that women's domestic work supports the upward mobility of men in the labor force, and their ability to procure material wealth and power while ensuring the domination and subordination of women. And today, even given significant transformations in social consciousness, women's advocacy, and women's rights, hidden assumptions of sex and gender continue to pervade our cultural discourses and institutions, the materiality of our everyday lives (Bem, 1993), and the ways in which our subjectivities are constructed (Weedon, 1987). Pregnancy and child rearing are two very important aspects of the female experience that throughout history have led to the privileging of men over women. For the women in this research, this role of motherhood was a very important determination in their constructions of self, their experience, their subjectivities, their relations and engagements with others, and in their attempts to balance work and study.

Motherhood

Sophie, like Janet, Amy and Diana, chose an online graduate education because of their familial and child rearing responsibilities. They perceived it as the only viable option for study as it could fit around their primary responsibility. Their choice, however, and the subject positions they assumed, often placed them in marginal ways, highlighting very important mechanisms through which the exercise of power guides or controls the actions of individuals. In the discursive field of family, for instance, the sexual division of labor, and the expectation and "naturalness" of women to take on domestic labor and childcare roles, hinders their ability to pursue other interests or activities not aligned with this "natural" position. Taking care of children and performing domestic tasks is seen, within the conservative discourse of the family, as women's primary responsibility (Weedon, 1987). "To be a wife and mother is seen as

women's primary role and the source of full self-realization, the natural structure of femininity will ensure that women can achieve fulfillment through these tasks" (Weedon,1987, p. 38). This role as a primary one for mothers, is offset by the "naturalness" of men to be engaged in the world of work. This conservative discourse creates only one "successful" or "legitimate" subject position for women, that of wife and mother, creating conflict when other positions, such as student, or worker, interfere with this role. At issue here is the idea that raising and caring for children and other domestic duties are predominantly the role of women (Weedon 1987).

Poststructural feminist critiques highlight that in the discursive field of the family, the sexual division of labor and power relations that typically result in the ability of men to wield more power, reproduce inequitable positions while also producing skills and responsibilities in gender related terms (Weedon, 1987). The possibility of resistance still remains, yet, within patriarchal societies, for women to resist certain subject positions and their implied meanings and values, calls for an identification with a subject position of an alternative form of femininity (Weedon, 1987). "We cannot escape the implications of femininity. Everything we do signifies compliance or resistance to the dominant norms of what it is to be women" (Weedon, 1987, p. 87). The discursive systems of meaning that structure social institutions and their processes, offer women forms of subjectivity that support patriarchal understandings of gender roles (Weedon, 1987).

In Camussi and Leccardi's (2005) exploration of gender stereotypes and the power of expectations, they cite results from a nationwide survey of Italian youths in 2002 indicating that traditional stereotypes for the roles of men and women have endured. In this survey, 61 percent of male and female youth believed that women should embrace their full obligation as mothers, and that men should work to support the family when children are young.

However, more women than men felt that household chores should be a shared responsibility, and that successful careers are equally relevant for males and females. For the women in this survey, these somewhat contradictory beliefs support certain stereotypes of sexual difference, while resisting others. Camussi and Leccardi (2005) argue that these contradictions are the result of two conflicting logics, that of time as it relates to outside public work; and time as private, relating to the family; and where tensions exist among both. These tensions are the result of a disconnection between beliefs in ideals and of reality as they relate to the nature of perpetual change within work and family life; and of the variable nature of changes that occur through one's life course in terms of work and family.

Sophie's experience within this program highlights quite clearly how surreptitiously gender stereotypes, gender roles, and the privileging of male experience can work. Before Sophie began this program, she shared that "we think of ourselves as equal in Canada… and having certain rights that are equal… and equal pay for equal work, but then you start to study these issues and you think we are so not even close" (Sophie, p. 12, para 12, 14). The choices that Sophie made, for study and for work, centered on her family life, and what would work best for the family, and that would allow her to fulfill her responsibilities within this sphere. She has, since beginning the program, begun to question the extent of her freedom, and her beliefs in a freedom that belie its promise, for her chosen lifestyle was perhaps not a decision over which she had much choice to begin with. Her husband's job demanded a great commitment in terms of hours spent away from home, and consequently she found work that was close to home; and chose online study that provided great flexibility in terms of time, so that she could continue with her primary responsibilities to the family. And, as she relates, this role is not one expected of fathers, and that judgment falls on women when issues related to child rearing

are highlighted. These values she believes are also reproduced within our social institutions, like schools, given their proclivity toward assigning mothers with the responsibilities of picking up sick children, and of ensuring that children are well behaved and well taken care of. Sophie's studies in this program opened up alternative ways of constituting the meaning of her experiences. She came to recognize that the ways in which she is limited and defined as a subject, are the result of historically specific discourses and forms of meaning that structure her subjectivity. As a mother she is expected to meet all of her children's needs, and she is judged by her ability to meet these demands. Other subject positions that she assumed, such as student and worker, she balanced around this primary responsibility.

Amy also juggled work and study around this primary role. She states that in terms of online graduate study, "she couldn't do it any other way" (p. 6, para 6), believing that for her alternatives did not exist. And as she relates, "not that men don't take care of their children too, but I think for me once the kids are up, I really can't do much other than take care of them" (p. 2, para 23); highlighting her central role as caregiver and also of forms of subjectivity and gendered expectations that fit with societal prescripts of appropriate behavior.

Flannery (2000) argues that girls are taught to be "nurturers, caregivers, model mothers and wives" (p. 64), in contrast to boys who are taught to be "competitive, and to be breadwinners" (p. 64). Negotiating the role of caregiver and mother around work and study responsibilities demanded great flexibility around how these women structured their time. As Diana relates, [my children] "are my full-time job, so the part time work I do I just fit around where I can, yeah, mostly at night. My husband tries to help me, but he works full-time, but he will try and give me day during the week…where I can just do homework all day" (p. 7, para 5). Within a patriarchal nuclear family, the range of subjectivities available to men in this discursive

field are very different than those available to women. Diana's husband "tries to help", but it is clear that the expectation for him to help is not implied, nor necessary. As a favor to Diana he will take on some of her responsibilities, although his primary role is not one of caregiver.

Bem (1993) argues that few institutional supports exist for allowing women to balance work and family roles. As she states, "women's biological and historical role as mother does not limit their access to economic and political resources. What limits access is an androcentric social world that provides but one insititutionalized mechanism for coordinating work in the paid labor force with the responsibilities of being a parent: having a wife at home to take care of the children" (Bem, 1993, p. 185). It is the structure of institutions and the organization of the paid work place that according to Bem (1993) seriously limits the political and economic resources that are available to women. If institutions were reconstructed in a way that was inclusive for both the male and female experience, there would be institutionalized supports in place that would coordinate work and family life. As an example, Bem (1993) cites the need for paid pregnancy leave; paid leave for tending to sick children; paid childcare; and a change in the organization of work life where hours in a work day are aligned with the hours of schooling, and where women could work less than a 40 hour work week when their children are small, and transition to 40 hours once they are older. The disadvantages for women are wide-ranging, influencing women in many different situational contexts. For example, women with high career aspirations who wish to make significant advancements in their fields often see that this demands a choice to remain childless. This, however, is not a requirement for men and when men do choose to have a family, their ability and commitment to their job is not questioned. Single mothers conversely, are stigmatized by their position and their apparent inability to have a male breadwinner to provide for them. What they need however, is support, socially, culturally,

and institutionally for carrying out their responsibilities as a worker and as a parent. For married women with children who work outside the home, affordable daycare can also be the source of financial and emotional struggles. For married women whose spouse has the potential to draw high earnings, the decision to stay home with children is a viable and attractive option, although with a dissolution of the marriage, women face greater financial losses and the disadvantage of lost time building a career with high earning potential.

Also at issue here is the value that is placed only on employment that contributes to the gross national product, and the systemic devaluing of the work required in raising children. Shifting these androcentric values would see a change in the financial compensation given to professional childcare workers, along with a shift in the value given to full time parenting as a very important role that is taken for the good of society (Bem, 1993). An important way in which sex discrimination works is in

> forcing women to make their life choices in a social world so androcentric that it provides few institutional mechanisms for coordinating work in the paid labor force with the responsibilities of being a parent. Situating employed mothers in an institutional vacuum has left each women to piece together her own arrangements for coordinating paid work and family; in addition it has all but guaranteed that most women's advances in the labor market come at a formidable cost to the individual. (Bem, 1993, p. 190)

However, creating more equitable conditions must go beyond just institutional supports. The discursive systems of meaning that structure social institutions and their processes, also offer women only certain forms of subjectivity that also limits their field of action (Weedon, 1987).

Karen, like many women, chose to stay home with her children when they were young given her husband's potential to draw high earnings in his position. For her, however, this decision also meant relocation to a foreign country where great gender inequality and disparity also existed, and also where her own subjectivities were influenced by the dominant cultural

discourses of her new home. Bem (1993) wrote in her argument that "most women's advances in the labor market come at a formidable cost to the individual" (p. 190); and for Karen and the many women she was friends with in Saudi Arabia who left careers to relocate for economic resources this could bring to the family and for which they could have the opportunity to stay home with their children, they also suffered formidable individual costs. Since Karen's stay in Saudi Arabia, she relates that "I just don't have the same assurance in myself" (p. 13, para 15).

My own story is not unlike the stories of these women in terms of the adoption of stereotypical domestic roles and childcare responsibilities, for I also arranged my work life and educational pursuits around these responsibilities. Although, throughout this research process I have gained a new awareness of the ways in which gendered roles, stereotypes, and the division of labor according to sex categories systematically devalues and limits the possibilities of women and the forms of subjectivity available to them. While I do not believe these gendered roles and relations are an inevitability, within the social construction of my own gendered identity, notions of accountability continue to play a role in the regulation of my behavior. I see that my identity is not as coherent as I would like to believe in this respect as I continue to adopt stereotypical ways of acting and of understanding myself despite my desire to fight and stand for more equitable social relations. For the women in this study, this notion of accountability to dominant stereotypes in the regulation of behavior was also evident. For instance, although Sophie acknowledged the existence of inequitable gender relations and expectations, the expectations of others, and the ways others assessed her actions and her role as a mother, was an important factor in the decisions and choices she made. For the women in this study, however, an increasing awareness of the inequity that dominant gender roles and stereotypes have produced in their educational endeavors, has pushed them to consider how these expectations have influenced

other parts of their lives, and to question their constructions in the outside world. Most of these women chose online study not because of a personal preference for this form of learning, but for the flexibility it offered, although, throughout this process they have gained a new awareness of the stereotyping of their aspirations and responsibilities. Sophie, for example, acknowledges that gendered stereotypes have influenced her decisions around work and education, and has begun to question the extent of her freedom to choose alternatives as societal and institutional discourses continue to encourage and support inequitable gender relations.

The assumptions of gendered appropriate behavior provide a structure for organizing a belief system and it acts in ways to confine and define the nature of our participation (Camussi & Leccardi, 2005). For the women in this research, discourses of gender also played an important role in how they understood and engaged in online discussion forums within this program.

Engagement in Online Discussion

Much gender research online has focused on issues of access and representation, and barriers for equitable participation (Herring, 2000; Moffatt, 1997; Yates, 1997). While female participation in higher education has seen dramatic increases over the last thirty years (Burtch 2005), research has shown greater participation rates for men in online discussion (Barrett& Lally, 1999; Ferris, 1996; Herring, 2000; Lawlor, 2006), and evidence that men have greater influence over discussion topics, and that contributions of women are often ignored (Ferris, 1996; Herring, 2000). Results of greater male participation however are inconsistent. Fahy (2000) in his research on gendered online communications for example, found relatively equal rates of participation for males and females, although gendered styles of communication

were evident. And, evidence of gendered styles of communicating and of conversational purpose in online contexts, has found much support in gender research online (Fahy, 2000; Gilligan, 1982; Herring, 1996, 2000; Lawlor, 2004). This research suggests that for women, interaction is focused on connection and maintaining relationships with a style that has been identified as "rapport talk" (Tannen, 1994); and for men, communication styles are often more declamatory, which has been described as "report talk" (Tannen, 1994). Again, research claims are inconsistent, as some research articulates very different learning styles for women where solitary study is preferred and high levels of engagement with others is not a priority (Kramarae, 2001; Wall, 2004); and more recent research that has also shown higher levels of engagement and higher grades achieved by female students compared to male students (Garcia et al., 2010).

Karen and Ruth both believe that gendered differences were evident within online discussion forums, supporting many past claims that assert these differences exist. Karen believes that men are more willing to criticize others, and are more open to discussions where opinions are challenged. As she states, "I think women are uncomfortable disagreeing, they are uncomfortable calling somebody on something...And, they definitely have had a hard time doing that…I think it is cultural, we're still part of a lifestyle that expects men to be the ones to take the lead, and if they don't take the lead then no one does" (p. 12, para 1, 7, 9). As argued earlier, within certain discursive fields, like education for instance, there exists a range of modes of subjectivities. Karen believes women are uncomfortable disagreeing, and assuming leadership roles in their interactions with others, suggesting that their subjectivities situate them in marginal ways. These marginal positions, however, also reflect dominant discourses and stereotypical notions of gendered behavior that see cooperability and passivity as feminine, and taking authority, control, and being aggressive as masculine (Charlebois, 2011).

Karen's engagement and interaction was at odds with a "typical" or preferred communication style of women, and more aligned with an approach that Tannen (1995) characterized as "report talk", or "ritual opposition". For some women this style of communication has been adapted very successfully, and as Karen relates, in communications with one male student, "he and I fought most of the term. I mean just back and forward, not bad or anything, just differences of opinion. And he enjoyed it, I enjoyed it…I liked it, it was fun" (p. 4, para 9). For Karen the opportunity to study, and to connect with others in an online context, provided the possibility to create alternative enactments of self, and subjectivities very different from her identifications in other contexts. This context provided a space where she experienced greater confidence to construct alternative subject positions and different ways of being, and interacting with others.

Ruth also believed that gender differences existed in the communication styles of men and women online, and she believed that this online context provided a unique space for realizing the possibility of an inclusive arena for many different voices. As she relates, "everyone has to say something at least once. It is a huge gift; you get to hear all kinds of different voices" (p. 15, para 4). However, it is important to remember, as Zembylas and Vrasidas (2005) caution, that while the Internet introduces increased possibilities for accessing educative endeavors, and that allow for the expression of new ideas, it can also act to reinforce existing relations that privilege only a few. The use of Internet software applications, such as those that allow online asynchronous discussion, while drawing attention to certain things, ideas or people, like those that fit with the dominant discourses, concurrently ignores others. Foucault (1980) names these knowledges that have been excluded and unstoried, as subjugated knowledges. They are the knowledges that have been silenced, and written out of history, like those knowledges created

by women. Foucault (1980) explains that they comprise "a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity" (p. 82). Ruth attested to the existence of this form of exclusion in her experiences with one particular online forum. As she relates, "I saw that they were only talking about men, and using male writing…this other guy [an instructor] did not give options. He just said, no, this is irrelevant. This doesn't fit" (p. 7, para 2)... "And, in that classroom basically, if people said what the professor wanted to hear he was happy. And, I noticed, and I did a count on this, he responded mainly to male students, not to female students" (p. 8, para 6). This exclusion worked in two ways, on the stories and experiences of women, and also on the acknowledgment and attention given to female voices within the discussion. This exclusion of female experience supports past research that suggests males have greater control and influence over topics of discussion, and that while women 'speak' online, their contributions are often ignored (Ferris, 1996; Herring, 1996). Zembylas and Vrasidas (2005) argue that within the context of discussions online, men often use methods for silencing women, much like those used in face to face contexts. These techniques include: "ignoring the topics women introduce, producing conversational floors based on hierarchy instead of collaboration, dismissing women's responses as irrelevant, and contributing a large number of text messages" (p. 66).

Brooks and Edwards (1997) write that "women's lives, like those of all people, can be understood as narratively structured. Since narrative can be understood as a social construction we write our lives within the broad pattern of dominant social discourse" (p. 5). For Janet, the dominant discourse around sex, gender, gender roles and gender stereotypes played an important role in shaping her relations with others and her engagement and participation with the

online discussions. Dominant gender narratives that encourage girls to be nurturers, and peacemakers, and boys to be competitive and to master tasks, teach very different roles for males and females, creating also very different forms of subjectivity, and beliefs about individual capability and competence (Flannery, 2000; Brooks & Edwards, 1997). Janet did not view herself within a central role in the online community, or as a potential leader. In her description of her most important contribution to the community, she shares that "being the cheerleader; that is what I like to do, encourage people. I might express a different opinion, but I like to think I am helping them to contribute by creating an environment that I would like to be in. One that people respect me, and are cheering me on to try and contribute to the group" (p. 11, para. 7). Here Janet also raises a very interesting view of cheerleading as a reciprocal process of both encouragement and cheering. She is cheering on others, but they cheer her on as well. This may also suggest a desire to keep the discussions on a non-emotional level, or to avoid either debate or any type of discord.

Charlebois (2011) argues that the classroom culture of schools is another context where asymmetrical gender relations and the construction of dominant/subordinate identities are produced and maintained. For example, "women who attempt to claim and exercise power can be seen as facing a double bind because power is associated with masculinity which by definition opposes femininity" (Charlebois, 2011, p. 52). Women who practice forms of masculinity garner a measure of increased power through this practice, although adoption of gendered actions not in alignment with one's associated sex category characterization can produce sanctions and marginalization. Masculine leadership styles, confident self-expression, and confrontational approaches taken by women are seen as embodiments of an oppositional femininity, which

transgresses the dominant construction of femininity. Sanctions that this can generate reflect the repressive potential that constitutes this dominant embodiment (Charlebois, 2011).

While Karen's engagement in the online forum reflected an adoption of an oppositional femininity, Janet's engagement embodied a more dominant femininity in both her manner of engagement and decisions made about engagement. Dominant sexual narratives that identify women as "sexual with men" (Brooks & Edwards, 1997), and as "sexual seducers" (Flannery, 2000); and boys as "sexually assertive" also had an important influence over the way Janet structured, defined, and limited her place and engagement with others. As she relates, "I feel more comfortable interacting with women online, and the gay men I've encountered. I like interacting with them as well…If I were in a face to face class, I feel more comfortable being a married woman, talking to other women, or gay men than I would a straight man…You don't know how others will interpret why you are interacting with them…because sexuality does come into play…I wouldn't want anyone to think I was spending time with them because I was interested in them, so, to avoid that you just don't interact with them very much" (p. 10, para 9, 11). For women, identification as sexual enticers have dominated cultural and social discourses, and has created a narrative for women that sees their sexuality as a means of procuring and maintaining relationships with men (Brooks & Edwards, 1997). Janet's choice to avoid interactions with heterosexual men suggests that she may be unsure about not only how to interpret these conversations, but also how to respond to them. She is imposing sexual undercurrents to the interactions in these contexts which reflects this uncertainty, and also reflects the culpability of women in these dominant sexual narratives. She sees herself as the one who might be a trigger, thus the one to blame if "sexuality comes into play". Dominant discourses around female sexuality define women as sexually passive and demure, and structure individual

subjectivities and the ways in which women behave, live, dress, and interact with others. Failure

to maintain a sexually modest self-presentation and deportment is interpreted as a sign of sexual

availability, an incitement to male sexuality (Weedon, 1987). Weedon (1987) explains that this is

itself "socially constructed as an ever-present, powerful thrust of sexual drives which society,

and women in particular, must hold in check by not offering 'unreasonable' provocation" (p. 37).

The forms of subjectivity that Janet has taken up suggest that she feels accountable for any

incitement or provocation of male sexuality, thus chooses to act in particular ways. Avoiding

interactions with men frees her from the judgment of others, and also from unwanted

provocation. Although,

> we do not just write our lives according to the dominant discourses, we weave our lives
> around in a myriad of variations and subversions. Although our thoughts and actions
> appear to be structured by dominant social narratives we can disrupt the power of these
> narratives within our lives when we begin to become aware of experience that exceeds or
> falls outside of the dominant narrations and begin to narrate that experience. (Brooks &
> Edwards, 1997, p. 5)

Experiences of connection with others within the online forums revealed important ways in

which women located themselves, and also ways in which power and control operate.

Discourses of Connection, Conflict, and Control

For these women, the amount and level of engagement with others online was

influenced by the requirements for participation, a sense of obligation felt toward others, the

general tenor of the discussions, and individual subjectivities.

Connection

Amy and Janet both described a greater sense of obligation to participate and engage in discussions when situated within a learning context with small groups. In these smaller groups, there existed a greater awareness of the 'other', along with a greater sense of visibility, and of the recognition of others. As Amy relates, "there was a little bit of pressure. The other group members would notice, and they would notice if you were not there…so that made a difference…an expectation from the other learners that I would be there" (p. 4, para 7). This feeling of responsibility to these students also carried on beyond the context of this individual course. Janet also describes similar thoughts, "the one class that we have with only five people, if people don't contribute it is very evident" (p. 8, para 2).

Communications in an online environment do not afford non-verbal or paralinguistic cues seen in face to face interactions that can help facilitate and sustain group dynamics, although Garrison et al (2000) argue that a "social presence" can be achieved online that is able to support learning, and that provides "the ability of participants to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as 'real people'"(Garrison et al, 2000, p. 4). Categories for social presence identified by Garrison et al include: emotional expression, open communication, and group cohesion. Indicators for the first category, emotional expression, involve "the ability and confidence to express feelings related to the educational experience" (Garrison et al, 2000, p. 22). Two examples of this type of emotional expression that can contribute to social presence within a group are humor and self-disclosure. Open communication, the second indicator of social presence involves "reciprocal and respectful exchanges and can be exemplified by mutual

awareness and recognition" (Garrison et al 2000, p. 23). Mutual awareness contributes to group

cohesiveness and involves recognition of the contributions of others. Recognition helps to

facilitate and sustain relationships with others. "Explicitly expressing appreciation and

agreement as well as complimenting and encouraging others are textual tools for communicating

recognition and support" (Garrison et al 2000, p. 23). This recognition is of particular importance

within a text-based context where non-verbal means of conveying this sentiment are unavailable.

The final category, group cohesion is indicated by "activities that build and sustain a sense of

group commitment" that is important for "building cohesion and a sense of belonging….for

sharing personal meaning" (Garrison et al 2000, p. 24). For Amy and Janet their experiences

engaging with other learners in these small groups showed many measures of social presence

where mutual awareness and recognition existed; and where this recognition and awareness

aided with building and maintaining these relations; and for developing group commitment and a

sense of belonging.

These feelings of connection and commitment however were not consistent, and

in another small group Karen relates that the students "do not correspond well" (p. 1, para 15).

This finding is interesting in light of the discussion in the previous section of oppositional

femininities and how the embodiment of identities that oppose dominant constructions can lead

to marginalization. Karen's communication style online took on a more confident and

confrontational approach, and in this one instance in particular, other participants did not respond

to her presentation in the online forum. As she related, "you had to do a breakdown of the

reading and then put some questions in, and I did it and nobody responded. Nothing. I think I got

one person the next week" (p. 1 para 20). This lack of response raises questions around the

possibility of marginalization, although other possibilities exist. Karen believed that others were

uncomfortable engaging in online discussions when the groups were small given the perception

of increased visibility this created. This, however, was unlike Amy's experience where

belonging to a smaller group led to increased engagement given a heightened sense of visibility

and responsibility.

For Diana, Amy, and Janet, their experiences with different groups also did not

show the same level of commitment and obligation. Janet relates that in her present course, if she

were not participating, "no one would really notice…so that made a difference" (p. 4, para 7).

Amy felt intimidated within the discussion forums in her first course, resulting in the decision to

disengage from the discussions and a temporary disengagement from the program. Diana also

expressed concern and hesitation around communications online. As she related, "I just don't

like revealing too much personally. I think I am leery of online conversation" (p. 11, para 12).

Zemblyas and Vrasidas (2005) raise very important questions surrounding the ethics of online

discussions, of our ethical responsibilities as educators and learners, and of the significance of

difference.

Ethics of Engagement

In this discussion, Zembylas and Vrasidas (2005) consider arguments made by

Emmanuel Levinas and his exploration of ethics and otherness. "In our everyday life—both

online and offline—we encounter Others, and we are called to respond somehow to their

otherness, whether we are face to face or not. We find ourselves *face to face*—literally and, with

the help of the interface, metaphorically—with the Other and in this interaction each of us

questions him or herself: What right do I have to act or not to act? What is my response to the

Other's gaze?" (p. 68). Levinas believes that we carry an ethical responsibility or obligation to

Others in our encounters with them. Zembylas and Vrasidas (2005) theorize that Levinas' notion

of ethically responsible relationships can be used within the context of online education where

his use of the term face to face is replaced with the "inter-face." The inter-face can be understood

as "that which comes between various faces (us) and who or what is 'out there'" (Zembylas &

Vrasidas, 2005, p. 68). In Levinas' view on ethics, it is within the face to face situation where we

can begin to investigate otherness. And, whether our encounters are face to face or mediated

through the inter-face, our response to the other acknowledges and affirms the right of their

existence. Our ethical responsibility begins with these encounters with others, although this

responsibility is never fully fulfilled as our subjectivities are continually constituted by this

responsibility and of the alterity and difference of the Other. "This has nothing to do with virtues

or moral codes; it is a never-ending process of suspending oneself in order to 'bear witness' and

'receive' the Other" (Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2005, p. 70). And, in this act of receiving and of

bearing witness, we suspend our beliefs and listen to what others can show us, and of what they

can reveal about new ways of understanding ourselves. I am called into question by the Other,

who "empties me of myself and empties me without end, showing me new resources, I did not

know I was so rich" (Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2005, p. 72).

The ambiguity of online communication, and of language and communication in

general, however, means that there lies an impossibility of ever knowing the Other. Therefore,

the focus of ethical responsibility does not rest on knowing, but on attempting to achieve

openness to what has been written, and to the otherness of the other. "Educators as well as

learners, especially in the fluid and continually changing online environment, should give up

their positions as 'knowers' and enter into an ethical relation that welcomes the Other and does

not reduce him or her to sameness" (Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2005, p. 72). This notion of an

ethical online pedagogy acknowledges the fluidity and continually shifting nature of identity within the learning context, and the responsibility that emerges from acts of communication and engagement; and where the ethics of this relationality emerges as a consequence of our obligation, not as a result of guidelines set out for the type of communication expected within these educational exchanges (Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2005).

   Limitations to this approach however, are evident. For example, the effects of social positioning and power that operate within cultural discourses and practices, provide a framework within which subjects are constituted, and where some subjects become powerful and others powerless (St. Pierre, 2000), thus highlighting the danger of romanticizing relationality within an online context: highlighting a struggle between the need to respect diverse identities, but also to consider the reality of the exclusion that defines their diversity. Efforts to empathize with the Other, Zembylas and Vrasidas (2005) argue, often originate from "indifference and egocentrism" rather than "respect and care" (p. 74). And so, efforts to respect difference should not be based on role play and the acquisition of assumed subject positions, but rather through the process of allowing others to speak for themselves. Another limitation involves the institutional structure of higher education that creates hierarchal relations and interactions between instructors and students, and between students. Within this structure, and within the reality of student grading, assessment, and classification, the ideals of Levinas' ethics are problematized. How can an ethical response to the Other be realized when the communication, engagement, and aptitude of students are assessed and ranked by their interaction and involvement? Foucault (1995/1977) argues that this form of assessment represents an important way in which the techniques of power operate, and of the workings of control. Ruth's reflection of a past experience interacting within an online discussion board where she believed only certain views were accepted, and only

certain people were acknowledged by the instructor, also highlights one example of the limitations and conflicts surrounding the realization of Levinas' ideal, and of the workings of power. Also at issue here is the way online text-based communications can in one way protect identities, yet also disclose them in unintended ways; and the way access to information, to individual histories, and to identities and subjectivities constructed outside the educational arena, can problematize relationships and our ethical responsibility to the Other in these learning contexts.

Power, Conflict and Control

Foucault (1980/1977) writes about a new economy of power that emerged 200-300 years ago, one that no longer resides within an identifiable person or political entity, but that circulates in an uninterrupted way over all by means of surveillance. This understanding of surveillance, and of the architectural idea of the Panopticon as a metaphor for the way in which the procedures of power circulate in continuous, individualized ways, was discussed in a previous section, although, what is important to consider here is how this surveillance and the circulation of power can operate in educational contexts. The Panopticon induces

> a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers. (Foucault, 1995/1977, p. 201)

Panoptic surveillance ensures visibility, yet the visibility is unverifiable for one never knows when a gaze is upon them. The central tower oversees all, in complete concealment; while in the

periphery, residents are seen, but cannot see. Space is arranged, activities are organized; individuals are observed, characterized and classified. Under this gaze, individual activity becomes normalized as inmates begin to act in ways they believe they should, in a process of self-surveillance (Foucault, 1995/1977).

In education, higher education, and online education, mechanisms of this form of disciplinary power can be seen where learners are distributed and arranged in particular ways that allow for continual assessment, classification and judgment. This disciplinary power is also imposed upon time where training becomes specialized and arranged in distinct stages, culminating with final examinations that qualify individuals according to their success and mastery. Educational programs likewise are developed in a sequential way, where individual stages are to be completed in a particular order and that involve elements of increasing difficulty.

The seriation of successive activities makes possible a whole investment of duration by power; the possibility of a detailed control and a regular intervention (of differentiation, correction, punishment, elimination) in each moment of time; the possibility of characterizing, and therefore of using individuals according to the level in the series that they are moving through; the possibility of accumulating time and activity, of rediscovering them, totalized and usable in a final result. (Foucault, 1995/1977, p. 160)

Self-surveillance is a critical element of the workings of disciplinary power. Within a society that is subject to this form of power, we as individuals engage in a process of self-discipline. Our desires and our resolve to act in ways aligned with the norm are not the result of any aspiration to live up to these standards, but rather as the result of the awareness that our behavior is being monitored and watched by a scrutinizing gaze. This inspecting gaze ensures that without physical force, individuals will oversee their own surveillance (Boshier & Wilson, 1998).

In online courses, disciplinary power and panoptic surveillance can operate in a number of ways. Disciplinary power is exercised through the way in which learning is designed and carried out, where students in online courses are classified into groups and accepted or not accepted into programs or courses based on prior success, marks awarded or credentials conferred. Once accepted, students are typically given personal identification numbers that identify them as individuals, and that can be used to track their activity. Through examinations, as discussed previously, surveillance is executed, and students are classified further, and either rewarded or punished. When passing grades are not maintained, exclusion is exercised in the form of expulsion from a particular program of study and a subsequent inability to receive credentials. Successful students are also identified throughout this process and may be offered monetary rewards for their grades and successful activities. Time and space in online courses are also controlled. Although many online educators espouse the notion of learning at a time and place that is convenient for students, there are often specific time frames to be considered, where assignments and conferencing activities are predetermined, and are set out to be completed within very specific blocks of time. As well, two very important ways in which panoptic power can be replicated in this context is through participation and through discussion.

Participation in formal discussion boards is one significant way in which monitoring and surveillance of student activity can be achieved. As an instructor, interactions and contributions of all students are visible and continuously monitored. Student participation within these discussions are also one component of the evaluative measures for the courses within this research, yet beyond the number of contributions to be made, it is not clear whether content is important in terms of evaluation, or whether other factors come into play, and how this mark for participation is determined. Amy describes her understanding of the expectations

around participation in the following way, "she's got a rubric around what a good response is…you have to actually have a good critical response…and then you have to respond to each question in a meaningful way. And that is how she marks you on participation" (p. 5, para 11, 13). Although a clear understanding of precisely how these contributions are evaluated is unclear. What is clear however, is that the contributions are watched, counted, and judged. In the pass/fail courses described by Amy and Janet, the expectations of online discussion, and the factors that reflect satisfactory standing were even more elusive. As a result, Amy and Janet exhibited stricter surveillance of their own behavior and greater participation. As Amy relates, "it was just pass/fail, but there were expectations…so you don't know what the cut off is. You don't know where the mark is, so I found myself participating a lot more" (p. 8, para 6, 8). Within the context of online education, there is also an understanding that participation in the formal discussion boards are archived, permanent records, which can potentially be accessed at any point in the future.

Through discussion, norms of appropriate rules of conduct are reinforced, and within this context, which can be likened to a "performance theatre" (Brookfield, 2001), activities of learners are carefully monitored and assessed by the "judges of normality" (Foucault, 1995/1977, p. 304). As Foucault (1995/1977) describes, "the judges of normality are present everywhere. We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the 'social worker'-judge, it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based; and each individual, wherever he may find himself, subjects to it his body, his gestures, his behavior, his aptitudes, his achievements" (p. 304). The judges monitor the extent of learners' contributions to the discussion and the appropriateness and suitability of these contributions as they relate to how closely they correspond to established norms. The power of the norm of good

discussion is reinforced through the operationalizing of graded participation, and through covert activities that signal approval or disapproval of individual contributions (Brookfield, 2001). Approval for example, is evidenced when certain comments are responded to, agreed with, praised, or likewise acknowledged; and the power that certain individuals wield is evidenced through their ability to control the topics of discussion (Herring, 1996; Ferris, 1996). The other side of this process occurs when learners fail to exemplify this established norm, and where disapproval is shown in an online context, through disagreement; or a lack of acknowledgement, or through ignoring the contributions of offenders. Foucault (1995/1977) identifies this power as normalization, where a "normalizing judgment" works through the act of comparing individual actions according to certain rules. "It refers individual actions to a whole that is at once a field of comparison, a space of differentiation and the principle of a rule to be followed" (Foucault, 1995/1977, p. 182). Individuals are thus differentiated from one another in terms of the rule to be followed as a minimum standard; it measures and creates a hierarchy of abilities of individuals and introduces rules of conformity to be accomplished; and it defines what is considered the ultimate difference, the limits of the abnormal. "The perpetual penalty that traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it 'normalizes'" (Foucault, 1995/1977, p. 183).

The Abnormal

Within the context of this online learning experience, conflict was one behavior identified as inappropriate and unsuitable, where participation in this form of conduct was defined as existing outside of the norms of propriety, and of the limits of normality. As the stories of these women reveal, the reaction to this identified abnormality led to the process of

exclusion, where others lurked, but did not respond to the contributions involved in these conflict ridden exchanges. Amy shares a story of "serious online argument", "you could almost feel the intensity of that discussion. And then they worked it out, but it was really interesting to sort of watch" (p. 10, para 12). In Diana's story, the instructor reposted the rules of discussion etiquette, thus communicating to the students involved, and the rest of the class, that this behavior was a departure from established norms. In other instances, as related by Ruth and Diana, other students felt anxiety and discomfort with the exchanges involving conflict, and made attempts to reinforce norms of a good discussion. Interestingly these covert attempts were made in forums outside the formal discussion boards, like e-mail and chat rooms. For example, Diana relates that in response to the online conflict, "in other forums, in different discussions, people were indirectly saying things like, isn't it great we all have individual opinions, and things of that nature. And, I thought everybody in their own way is trying to find a way to say, can we all be nice here and value one another, regardless of whether or not we differ in opinion" (p. 2, para 4). Ruth relates that "there were two guys in that course who e-mailed me behind the scenes, but he would not say anything on the board in class, and frightened me a little bit" (p. 10, para 1). She received support privately from others who believed the other individual in the exchange responded to her in an inappropriate manner. Ruth's experience also shows efforts of appeasement outside the formal space. Also, as highlighted earlier, Karen's story raises questions around how, for women, the embodiment of an identity that can elevate power and status, which in her case involved the adoption of a more confrontational and report-like communication style, carries with it the possibility of marginalization. This story however, may also reflect a typical reaction to report styles of communicating that do not necessarily encourage contributory responses. Others can challenge a matter of fact approach, although other than agreement, other

options do not exist. Karen chose to adopt this male style, but was disappointed with what it produced, termination of the discussion. Alternatively, this story may speak more to pedagogical design rather than discussion for it is possible other students were busy with other assignments and did not have time to respond to Karen's presentation.

The desire to appear 'normal' and to exemplify model behavior was also evidenced in Sophie's story where she felt her contribution in the formal space was misunderstood. "I wondered if he misunderstood that posting, did everyone misunderstand it?...I was a little bit embarrassed that maybe other people were saying this girl is a psycho. What's the matter with her?" (p. 11, para 2); thus identifying her as pathological, or abnormal. I certainly empathize with Sophie's story as I experienced similar feelings of embarrassment when I was challenged by another participant in an online learning discussion. Within this particular exchange, I felt the nature of the statements made by this individual were both confrontational and aggressive. I believed that in some ways this student misunderstood the argument I was making, so in my response I attempted to clarify my meaning, however, there was no further engagement with this discussion thread. I was left feeling attacked for no apparent reason, and that I had lost credibility with the group, and I wondered whether others would begin to question the value of my contributions. Since this event, I have come to realize that my reaction highlights quite clearly the concern I felt over how other participants perceived me, the influence their perception had on my sense of competence, and in my desire to appear "normal".

Exclusionary techniques are one important way of controlling behavior, and of creating limits that can be traced for defining difference, and for differentiating individuals; and where the pathological can enter consciousness. The process of defining and establishing acceptable norms requires this understanding of the pathological to set limits and to define rules

of conformity. It must be remembered however, that through these exclusionary practices, certain subjectivities, certain practices, and certain knowledges are also rejected (Gore, 1988). "The exercise of power itself creates and causes to emerge new objects of knowledge and accumulates new bodies of information. The exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power" (Foucault, 1995/1977, p. 51-52).

Poststructural critiques offer a very useful way of understanding the workings of power, and of the way in which intersecting systems of oppression and privilege, like gender, race, class, and sexual orientation, influence constructions of subjectivity, of knowledge, and of the experiences of learning (Foucault, 1995/1977; Tisdell, 1998).

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Internet has created a unique learning environment that can support and maintain interactions and connections with others on a global scale. Problematizing the relations that happen in this online space addresses ethical questions that are raised surrounding the possible enactments of self within this space, and how social and educational inequities can be reproduced. As Zembylas and Vrasidas (2005) argue, one way to do this is by "situating online educational opportunities within the context of the whole of what people value in their lives. Such an ethical problematizing of online education has to delve more deeply in to what online learning opportunities 'reveal' to us about ourselves and our relations to others, particularly given the lack of physical presence in online interaction" (p.66-67).

Summary

This research project explored a description and analysis of common themes among the narratives of six women involved in online learning events; that helped to shape their subjectivities and their relations with others. Four discourses shaped how these women negotiated their identifications and confined and defined their understandings of self and of others: discourses of difference; discourses of competence; discourses of gender; and discourses of connection, conflict and control. First, discourses of difference influenced individual subjectivities through an awareness of the self, especially as it related to an awareness of the other; of the existence of an online/offline binary that privileged the latter; and of descriptions

that differentiated between online and offline learning events. Second, the ways in which these women defined and redefined their competence also helped to shape their individual constructions of self and also their locatedness with the learning group. Third, hidden assumptions about sex and gender that impose certain structures on acceptable and allowable behavior was a significant finding in this research that influenced their decisions about how to engage and interact with others, and how they understood their roles in their social world. Lastly, the extent of their engagement with others and their sense of connection were influenced by the course requirements for participation, a feeling of obligation to others, individual subjectivities, the general tenor of the discussions and whether or not conflict was present. These explorations also highlighted very important ways in which power and control can operate within these learning events. Implications arising from these critiques are numerous and far-reaching.

Implications and Future Research

A poststructural critique of learning and identity in online learning events calls for an exploration of how intersecting systems of power and privilege influence our constructions of self, and of how our subjectivities are defined and redefined within this context. Future research, however, should address an exploration and review that considers other types of difference in this investigation. Rocco and West (1998) argue that one important way in which experience needs to be understood is through the lens of privilege, for "a much different picture of reality is constructed when the world is viewed through the lens of privilege" (p. 1), and a deconstruction of this privilege can lead to interesting and important contributions.

Deconstructing Privilege

"White males have neither race nor gender. They rarely, if ever, have to confront their whiteness or maleness, and what either means in their lives" (Rocco & West, 1998, p. 1). However, through an examination of privilege, and of the assumptions that perpetuate its existence, we can begin to imagine new realities. Rocco and West (1998) contend that it is the responsibility of the privileged, and of privileged adult educators in particular, to examine their status, and to consider the role they play in reproducing existing power structures that perpetuate this privilege. Privilege here is understood as "any unearned asset or benefit received by virtue of being born with a particular characteristic into a particular class. Privilege permeates our total being, often becoming part of our implicit knowledge, making its discovery a strenuous exercise" (Rocco & West, p. 2). Deconstructing privilege and the manifestations of privilege, however, is an important exercise for understanding how more equitable systems and structures can be created. Rocco and West (1998) call for a critical exploration of the ways in which knowledge and truth are constructed through Eurocentric views, from which a notion of universality, is assumed. They cite four errors of reasoning that are derived from an assumption of this belief in a universal experience: faulty generalizations, circular reasoning, mystified concepts, and partial knowledge. Faulty generalizations consider the experiences of one particular group, typically a dominant or privileged one, to be representative of the experiences of all other groups. Circular reasoning involves, for example, the development of theories derived through the study of white males, like that of intelligence for instance, that then dictate appropriate or inappropriate roles for all groups. In this type of reasoning, the theory ends where it began, with support for the interests for a certain privileged group. Mystified concepts

comprise those concepts and assumptions accepted uncritically, and without question. As an example, Rocco and West (1998) cite the belief that elderly individuals have little desire or ability to learn. Lastly, partial knowledge represents the consequence of these previous errors, where answers are formulated within the same tradition that posed the questions to begin with, substantiating and sanctioning the aforementioned errors in reasoning, and shaping the way we think. "These errors of reasoning support a worldview independent of any other worldview. This worldview of privilege takes on essential features that become given truths; what passes for fact is based upon other facts" (Rocco & West, 1998, p. 4).

The privileging of white male experience exists as a social construct, influencing our assumptions, beliefs, and our subjectivities as either part of the dominant class, or as existing outside of it. Deconstructing this privilege is an important beginning in the quest for change and for the realization of more equitable relationships, interactions, and structures. Important considerations and implications for practice must consider how privilege is reflected in our discourses, actions, language, and policies, and in, for example, "the choice of readings, the makeup of the professoriate, admission requirements, and power relations with students [which] are all examples of structural privilege in adult education" (Rocco & West, 1998, p. 4). Ruth's experience in the research conducted here, illustrated this structural realm of privilege, as evidenced in her struggles to bring readings into her courses that were authored by women, and through the ensuing conflicts she experienced with her professor.

Gender is one important determinant of privilege, although characteristics that define one's privilege, or lack of privilege, have intersecting influences with other attributes that help define our status. Some attributes interact with more privileged ones in such a manner that privilege from one characteristic is diminished, for instance, homosexual white males do not

share the same privilege as heterosexual white males. The value that is placed on certain

attributes has intersecting influences on the ways in which individuals are either privileged or

oppressed. White and black women, for example, are not equally disadvantaged, for a black

woman is denied privilege as both a black person, and as a woman, while white women are

disadvantaged in terms of their gender, they do share privilege as a result of their "whiteness"

(Rocco & West, 1998).

Future research should consider the experiences of those individuals whose

identities and subjectivities incorporate other types of difference with respect to attributes like

race, class, age, sexual orientation, and also of gender as it relates to these and other types of

determinants that contribute to a lack of privilege. Foucault (1980) argues that attention to things,

people, and ideas that have been excluded from the dominant discourses, and to those subjugated

knowledges that have been written out of our history, is an important entry point for critique.

Subjugated Knowledges

Foucault (1980) describes the importance of a local criticism that has led to the

"insurrection of subjugated knowledges" (p. 81). This re-emergence of disqualified, marginal

knowledges represents an important vehicle through which criticism and critique can be

performed. As Foucault (1980) explains:

> What it really does is to entertain the claims to attention of local, discontinuous,
> disqualified, illegitimate knowledges against the claims of a unitary body of theory which
> would filter, hierarchize, and order them in the name of some true knowledge and some
> arbitrary idea of what constitutes a science and its objects. (p. 83)

What this exercise is concerned with primarily, is with the workings of, or the "how of power"

(Foucault, 1980, p. 92), and of the centralizing effects and functioning of power within our

discourses and institutions. Two mechanisms, or limits, operate here: the "rules of right" that determine the limits of power, and the truths that are produced as effects of this power. There is a triangle formulated here, consisting of: power, right, truth. The question Foucault (1980) asks is this: "what rules of right are implemented by the relations of power in the production of discourses of truth?" (p. 93). This is an important question, for as Foucault (1980) argues, the exercise of power can only operate through the production of particular discourses of truth, and "truth" is implicated in the production of these particular discourses. "In the end we are judged, condemned, classified, determined in our undertakings, destined to a certain mode of living or dying, as a function of the true discourses which are the bearers of the specific effects of power" (Foucault, 1980, p. 94). Foucault's (1980) critique is concerned with an investigation into the workings of power, and into how subjects are constituted through the effects of power, especially those subjects who are constituted as "peripheral"; and through which techniques and procedures that operate at local and material levels.

> What is needed is a study of power in its external visage, at the point where it is in direct
> and immediate relationship with that which we can provisionally call its object, its target,
> its field of application, there—that is to say—where it installs itself and produces its real
> effects. (Foucault, 1980, p. 97)

Adult and higher education educators should continue to consider not only the functioning of power, and the discourses through which it operates, but also to consider this study of power and its effects at these local levels, and on the effects on those "peripheral" subjects who through their lack of privilege, have been disqualified and disregarded in the production of knowledge, and marginalized through the functioning of particular discourses of truth. The implications for practice in adult and higher education are vast, comprising a multitude of domains at individual,

local, institutional, and structural levels. Following is a more detailed discussion of these

implications, and of the ethical considerations that they embody.

Implications

Implications for practice must consider strategies for realizing an ethical

pedagogy in online education, and for understanding how difference matters within this context

(Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2005). A push for greater inclusivity that makes room for silenced voices

and subjugated knowledges is of course critical, however, these endeavors require more than, as

Judith Butler writes, "that theoretical gesture of pathos in which exclusions are simply affirmed

as sad necessities of signification" (cited in Britzman, 1998, p. 219). In a quest for inclusiveness,

there must also exist a consideration of how particular discourses surrounding difference pose

certain characteristics as abnormal against a backdrop of what can be considered normal. For

instance, in the case of sexual orientation, homosexuality is set in opposition to discourses that

position heterosexuality as normal and, thus, simply including marginalized homosexual voices

does little for challenging this assumption, or for effecting significant change.

The implications are far reaching, and involve the importance of considering a

wide range of issues including: our ethical obligations to others, and to the otherness of others in

online interactions, that recognizes the need for respecting difference, but also of recognizing the

reality of exclusion this difference can create (Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2005); power relations

amongst subjects; the productive effects of power and its influence on social relations, individual

subjectivities, and the construction of knowledge and of truth (Foucault, 1980); in curriculum

development and delivery, evaluation procedures, admission requirements, incentives and hiring

practices for faculty, scholarship and research, and pedagogical philosophies (Rocco & West,

1998; Yick et al., 2005), and their concomitant assumptions that privilege a dominant class; along with a consideration of gendered social relations and its systematic effects not only within the classroom, but also within the lived experience of individuals.

What is required, as Foucault (1980) asserts, is a new politics of truth, for it is through the production of particular discourses of truth where power operates, and where new possibilities can be imagined. So, the essential political problem becomes

> that of ascertaining the possibility of constructing a new politics of truth. The problem is not changing people's consciousness—or what is in their heads—but the political, economic, institutional regime of the production of truth. It is not a matter of emancipating truth from every system of power, but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural within which it operates at the present time. The political question, to sum up, is not error, illusion, alienated consciousness or ideology; it is truth itself. (Foucault, 1980, p. 133)

This research highlights very clearly the importance of understanding the productive effects of power in online learning events, and of how difference matters within this context. In my future research endeavors I would like to continue this critique, and to examine further the productive effects of power in online learning contexts, that will hopefully lead to an exploration of new ways of imagining these learning events, and of our interactions within them, where more equitable and ethical relations can be realized. In short this demands a future of different possibilities, and of truth re-imagined.

References

Anderson, J.H., & Damarin, S. K. (1996). Poststructural feminism and research in educational communications and technology. In D.H. Jonassen (Ed.), *Handbook of research for educational communications and technology* (pp. 269-275). New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan.

Anderson, T. (2003a). Getting the mix right again: An updated and theoretical rationale for interaction. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 4*(2)

Anderson, T. (2003b). Modes of interaction in distance education: Recent developments and research questions. In M. G. Moore & W. G. Anderson (Eds.), *The handbook of distance education* (pp. 129-144). Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Assoc., Inc.

Anderson, T., & Garrison, D. R. (1998). Learning in a networked world: New roles and responsibilities. In C. Gibson (Ed.), *Distance learners in higher education*. Madison, Wisconsin: Atwood Publishing

Anderson, T., Rourke, L., Garrison, D. R., & Archer, W. (2001). Assessing teaching presence in a computer conferencing context. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks, 5*(2), 1-17.

Ashmore, R. D. (1990). Sex, gender, and the individual. In L.A. Pervin (Ed.), *Handbook of personality* (pp. 486-526). New York: Guilford Press

Athenstaedt, U. (2003). On the content and structure of the gender role self-concept: Including gender-stereotypical behaviors in addition to traits. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 27*, 309-318.

Barrett, E., & Lally, V. (1999). Gender differences in an on-line learning environment. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning, 15*, 48-60.

Barrett, M. J. (2005). Making (some) sense of feminist poststructuralism in environmental education research and practice. *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, 10, 79-83.

Belenky, M. F., Clinchy, B., Goldberger, N., & Tarule, J. (1986). *Women's ways of knowing: The development of self, voice, and mind*. New York: Basic Books.

Bem, S. L. (1974). The measurement of psychological androgyny. *Journal of Counseling and Clinical Psychology, 42*(2), 155-162.

Bem, S. L. (1981). Gender schema theory: A cognitive account of sex typing. *Psychological Review, 88*(4), 354-364.

Bem, S. L. 1993). The lenses of gender: Transforming the debate on sexual inequality. London: Yale University Press.

Blake, N. (2000). Tutors and students without faces or places. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 34(1), 183-199.

Boshier, R., & Wilson, M. (1998). Panoptic variations: Surveillance and discipline in web courses. *1998 AERC Proceedings,* San Antonio, USA. Retrieved November 17, 2005 from http://www.edst.educ.ubc.ca/aerc/1998/98boshier.htm.

Bozovic, M. (Ed.). (1995). *Jeremy Bentham: Panopticon letters* (pp. 29-95). London: Verso. [Online Image]. Retrieved June 5, 2012 from http://cartome.org/panopticon1.htm.

Breustle, P., Haubner, D., Schinzel, B., Holthaus, M., Remmle, B., Schirmer, D., & Reips, U. (2009). Doing e-learning/doing gender? Examining the relationship between students' gender concepts and e-learning technology. *5ᵗʰ European Symposium on Gender and ICT Digital Cultures: Participation-Empowerment-Diversity*, March 5-7, 2009, University of Bremen.

Britzman, D. P. (1998). Is there a queer pedagogy: Or, stop reading straight. In W.F. Pinar (Ed.) *Curriculum: Toward new identities* (pp. 211-231). New York: Garland Publishing, Ltd.

Brookfield, S. (2001). Unmasking power: Foucault and adult learning. The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education, 15 (1), 1-23.

Brooks, A. K. & Edwards, K. (1997). Narratives of women's sexual identity development: A collaborative inquiry with implications for rewriting transformative learning theory. *1997 AERC Proceedings.*

Bullen, M. (1998). Participation and critical thinking in online university distance education. *Journal of Distance Education, 13*(2), 1-32.

Burnham, B.R., & Walden, B. (1997). Interactions in distance education: A report from the other side. *1997 AERC Proceedings,* Stillwater, USA. Retrieved August 1, 2006 from: http://www.edst.edu.ubc.ca.aerc/1997/97burnham.html.

Burtch, B. (2005). Review of further education/higher education links in Canada. In J. Gallacher & M. Osborne (Eds.), *A contested landscape: International perspectives on diversity in mass higher education* (pp. 47-62). Leicester, England: NIACE.

Burubules, N., & Bruce, B. (2005). Theory and research on teaching as dialogue [Electronic Version]. Retrieved November 9, 2005 from: http:www.lsrl.uiuc.edu/chip/pubs/dialogue.html.Camussi, E., & Leccardi, C. (2005). Stereotypes of working women: The power of expectations. *Social Science Information*, 44 (1), 113-140.

Carter, K. (1993). The place of story in the study of teaching and teacher education. *Educational Researcher*, 22 (1), 5-12.

Charlebois, J. (2011). *Gender and the construction of hegemonic and oppositional femininities.* Blue Ridge Summit, PA: Lexington Books.

Conrad, D. (2005). Building and maintaining community in cohort-based online learning. *Journal of Distance Education*, 20 (1), 1-20.

Corneluis, S., Gordon, C., & Harris, M. (2009). *'Unfettered expression of thought? Experiences of anonymous online role play*. Paper presented at the 16th annual ALT-C Conference of the Association of Learning Technology, Manchester, UK.

Corneluis, S., Gordon, C., & Harris, M. (2011). Role engagement and anonymity in synchronous online role play. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 12 (5), 57-73.

Cuadrado-Garcia, M., Ruiz-Molina, M., & Montoro-Pons, J.D. (2010). Are there gender differences in e-learning use and assessment? Evidence from an interuniversity online project in Europe. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences* 2, 367-371.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Introduction: Entering the field of qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 1-17). London: SAGE Publications.

Edwards, R., & Clarke, J. (2002). Flexible learning, spatiality and identity. *Studies in Continuing Education, 24*(2), 153-165.

Fahy, P. (2002). Use of linguistic qualifiers and intensifiers in a computer conference. *The American Journal of Distance Education, 16*(1), 5-22.

Faith, K. (1988). Gender as an issue in distance education. *Journal of Distance Education*, 3 (1), 75-79.

Fendler, L. (1998). What is it impossible to think: A genealogy of the educated subject. In T.S. Popkewitz & M. Brennan (Eds.), *Foucault's challenge: Discourse, knowledge and power in education* (pp. 39-63). New York: Teachers College Press.

Ferris, S. P. (1996). Women online: Cultural and relational aspects of women's communication in online discussion groups. *Interpersonal Computing and Technology: An Electronic Journal for the 21st Century, 4*(3-4), 29-40.

Flannery, D. D. (2000). Identity and self-esteem. In E. Hayes & D. D. Flannery (Eds.), *Women as learners: The significance of gender in adult learning* (pp.53-78). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Flannery, D. D., & Hayes, E. (2000). Women's learning: A kaleidoscope. In E. Hayes & D. D. Flannery (Eds.), *Women as learners: The significance of gender in adult learning* (pp. 1-22). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Folkers, D. A. (2005). Competing in the marketspace: Incorporating online education into higher education: An organizational perspective. *Information Resources Management Journal* 18 (1), 61-77.

Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977* (Gordon, C. Ed., Gordon, C., Marshall, L., Mepham, J., & Soper, K. Trans.). New York: Pantheon.

Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (Sheridan, A. Trans.). New York: Vintage Books. (Original work published 1977).

Foucault, M. (1983a). Structuralism and poststructuralism: An interview with Michel Foucault (Raulet, G. Ed.). *Telos,* 55, 195-211.

Foucault, M. (1983b). Afterword: The subject and power. In H.L. Dreyfus & P. Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond structuralism and hermeneutics* (pp. 208-226). Chicago: the University of Chicago Press.

Foucault, M. (1990). *Politics, philosophy, culture: Interviews and other writings of Michel Foucault 1977-1984* (D. Kritzman, Ed.; Harding, J. Trans.). New York: Routledge. (Original work published 1988).

Foucault, M. (1990). *The history of sexuality: An introduction* (Hurley, R. Trans.). New York: Vintage Books. (Original work published 1978).

Foucault, M. (1994). *Ethics: Subjectivity and truth: Essential works of Foucault 1954-1984* (Rabinow, P. Ed; Hurley, R. Trans.). New York: The New Press

Freire, P. (1971), *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

Frost, S.E. (1989). *Basic teachings of the great philosophers: A survey of their basic ideas.* Toronto: Anchor Books.

Garrison, D. R. (2006). Online community of inquiry update: Social, cognitive and teaching presence issues: University of Calgary. Unpublished.

Garrison, D. R., Anderson, T., & Archer, W. (2000). Critical inquiry in a text-based

environment: Computer conferencing in higher education. *Internet and Higher

Education, 2*(2-3), 1-14.

Garrison, D. R., Anderson, T., & Archer, W. (2001). Critical thinking, cognitive presence, and

computer conferencing in distance education. *The American Journal of Distance

Education, 15*(1), 7-23.

Garton, L., Haythornwaite, C., & Wellman, B. (1997). Studying online social networks

[Electronic Version]. *JCMC*, 3. Retrieved March 4, 2007 from:

http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol3/issue1/garton.html.

Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development*.

Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Godwin, S. (2005). The impact of interaction and integration in computer mediated higher

education [Electronic Version]. Retrieved June 20, 2006 from:

http://kn.open.ac.uk/workspace.cfm?wpid=2668

Gore, J.M. (1998). Disciplining bodies: On the continuity of power relations in pedagogy. In

T.S. Popkewitz & M. Brennan (Eds.), *Foucault's challenge: Discourse, knowledge and

power in education* (pp. 231-251). New York: Teachers College Press.

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In N. K.

Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 105-117). London:

SAGE Publications.

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging

confluences. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative

research* (3rd. ed., pp. 91-212). London: Sage.

Gunawardena, C. N., & Zittle, F. J. (1997). Social presence as a predictor of satisfaction within a computer-mediated conferencing environment. *American Journal of Distance Education, 11*(3), 8-26.

Gunn, C. (2003). Dominant or different? Gender issues in computer supported learning. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks, 7*(1), 14-30.

Hall, S. (1996). Introduction: Who needs identity? In S. Hall & P. Gay (Eds.), *Questions of cultural identity* (pp. 1-17). London: Sage Publications.

Haraway, D. J. (1991). *Simians, cyborgs, and women: The reinvention of nature*. London: Free Association Press.

Harvey, L. (2009). Are you representin? Instructor identity in online courses. Retrieved November 1, 2009 from http://journalsufv.ca/rr/RR11/article-PDF's/Kirkland.harvey.pdf

Hayes, E. (2000). Voice. In E. Hayes & D. D. Flannery (Eds.), *Women as learners: The significance of gender in adult learning* (pp. 79-109). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Herring, S. (1996). Two variants of an electronic message schema. In S. Herring (Ed.), *Computer mediated communication: Linguistic, social and cultural perspectives* (pp. 81-106). Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Co.

Herring, S. (2000). Gender differences in CMC: Findings and implications. *The CPSR Newsletter, 18*(1).

Hilllman, D. (1999). A new method for analyzing patterns of interaction. *The American Journal of Distance Education, 13*(2), 37-47.

Hillman, D., Willis, D. J., & Gunawardena, C. N. (1994). Learner-interface interaction in distance education: An extension of contemporary models and strategies for practitioners. *The American Journal of Distance Education, 8*(2), 30-42.

Hirumi, A. (2002). The design and sequencing of e-learning interactions: A grounded approach. *International Journal on E-Learning, March*,19-27.

Hole, R. (2007). Narratives of identity: A poststructural analysis of three Deaf women's life stories. *Narrative Inquiry*, 17 (2), 259-278.

Iseke-Barnes, J. M. (1997). Poststructural analysis of reading and writing through/with technology. *Curriculum Studies, 5*(2), 195-211.

Johannesson, I. A. (1988). Genealogy and progressive politics: Reflections on the notion of usefulness. In T.S. Popkewitz & M. Brennan (Eds.), *Foucault's challenge: Discourse, knowledge and power in education* (pp. 297-315). New York: Teachers College Press.

Kanuka, H. (2005). An exploration into facilitating higher levels of learning in a text-based Internet learning environment using diverse instructional strategies [Electronic Version]. *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, 10 (3), article 8. Retrieved September 30, 2006 from: http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol10/issue3/kanuka.html .

Kanuka, H., & Anderson, T. (1998). Online social interchange, discord, and knowledge construction. *Journal of Distance Education, 13*(1), 57-74.

Kanuka, H., & Garrison, D. R. (2004). Cognitive presence in online learning. *Journal of Computing in Higher Education, 15*(2), 30-48.

Kirkup, G., & von Prummer, C. (1990). Support and connectedness: The needs of women distance education students. *Journal of Distance Education, 5*(2), 9-31.

Kramarae, C. (2001). *Third shift: Women learning online*. Washington DC: American Association of University Women Educational Foundation.

Krueger, J., Hasman, J., Acevedo, M., & Villano, P. (2003). Perceptions of trait typicality in gender stereotypes: Examining the role of attribution and categorization processes. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 29* (1), 108-116.

Lawlor, C. (2006). Gendered interactions in computer-mediated computer conferencing. *Journal of Distance Education, 21 (2), 26-43.*

McConnell, D. (2002). Negotiation, identity and knowledge in e-learning communities. Paper presented at the 3rd International Conference on Networked Learning.

McKlin, T., Harmon, S. W., Evans, W., & Jones, M. G. (2002). Cognitive presence in web-based learning: A content analysis of students? Online discussions [Electronic Version]. *IT Forum*, 60. Retrieved July 21, 2006 from:

http://it.coe.uga.edu/itforum/paper60/paper60.html.

McLaren, P. (1989). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education*. Toronto: Irwin Publishing.

McLean, C. L. (2005). Evaluating critical thinking skills: Two conceptualizations. *Journal of Distance Education, 20*(2), 1-20.

Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Meyer, K. (2003). Face-to-face versus threaded discussions: The role of time and higher order thinking. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks, 7*(3), 55-65.

Mishler, E.G. (1986). The analysis of interview-narratives. In T.R. Sarbin (Ed.), *Narrative psychology: The storied nature of human conduct*. New York: Praegar.

Moffatt, S. (1997). Gender issues in teaching information technology courses by distance education. *Distance Education, 18*(2), 369-379.

Moore, M. G. (1989). Editorial: Three types of interaction. *The American Journal of Distance Education, 3*(2), 1-6.

Nichols, S. (2002). Parents' construction of their children as gendered, literate subjects: A critical discourse analysis. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy, 2*(2), 123-144.

Oztok, M., & Brett, C. (2011). Social presence and online learning. *The Journal of Distance Education*, 25 (3).

Oswald, D. L., & Lindstedt, K. (2006). The content and function of gender self-stereotypes: An exploratory investigation. *Sex Roles, 54*, 447-458.

Packer, M. J., & Addison, R. B. (1989). Evaluating an interpretive account. In M. J. Packer & R. B. Addison (Eds.), *Entering the circle: Hermeneutic investigation in psychology* (pp. 275-321). Albany: Sany Press.

Paz Dennen, V., & Paulus, T. M. (2005, May 30-June4). *Researching "collaborative knowledge building" in formal distance learning environments.* Paper presented at the Computer Supported Collaborative Learning, Taipei, Taiwan.

Polkinghorne, D.E. (1995). Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis. I J. Hatch & R. Wisnewski (Eds.), *Life history and narrative* (pp. 5-23). Washington DC: Falmer Press.

Reynolds, C. (2004). Complex learning processes for girls and boys. *Orbit, 34*(1), 28-30.

Rocco, T. S. & West, G. W. (1998). Deconstructing privilege in adult education. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 48 (3), 1-9.

Rourke, L., & Anderson, T. (2000). Exploring social communication in computer conferencing. *Journal of Interactive Learning Research, 13*(3), 257-273.

Rourke, L., & Anderson, T. (2004). Validity in quantitative content analysis. *Educational Technology Research and Development, 52*(1), 5-18.

Rourke, L., Anderson, T., Garrison, D. R., & Archer, W. (2004). Assessing social presence in asynchronous text-based, computer conferencing [Electronic Version]. Retrieved July 21, 2006 from: http://www.communitiesofinquiry.com/documents/SocialPresence_Final.pdf .

Rovai, A. P., & Baker, J. D. (2005). Gender differences in online learning: Sense of community, perceived learning, and interpersonal interactions. *The Quarterly Review of Distance Education, 6*(1), 31-44.

Rye, S. A. , & Stokken, A. M. (2012). The implication of the local context in global online education. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 13 (1), 191-206.

Savicki, V., Lingenfelter, D., & Kelley, M. (1996). Gender, language style, and group composition in Internet discussion groups. *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, 12 (3). Retrieved September 21, 2002 from: http//www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol12/issue3/oldsavicki.html.

Scott, J. W. (1988). Deconstruction equality-versus-difference: Or, the uses of post-structuralist theory for feminism. *Feminist Studies*, 14 (1), 33-50.

Scott, J. W. (1991). The evidence of experience. *Critical Inquiry*, 17, 773-797.

Slavkin, M. (2001). How can awareness of gender identity improve the performance of students? [Electronic version]. *Journal of College Reading and Learning, 32*(1).

Sondergaard, D. E. (2002). Poststructural approaches to empirical analysis. *Qualitative Studies in Education,* 15 (2), 5-12.

St. Pierre, E. A. (1997). Methodolody in the fold and interruption of transgressive data. *Qualitative Studies in Education, 10 (2), 175-189.*

St. Pierre, E. A. (2000). Poststructural feminism in education: An overview. *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 13 (5), 477-515.

St. Pierre, E. A. , & Pillow, W. S. (2000). Introduction: Inquiry among the ruins. In E. A. St. Pierre and W. S. Pillow (Eds.), *Working the ruins: Feminist poststructural theory and methods in education* (pp. 1-24). New York: Routledge.

Swan, K. (2002). Building learning communities in online courses: The importance of interaction. *Education, Communication, and Information, 2*(1), 23-49.

Tannen, D. (1995). The power of talk: Who gets heard and why. *Harvard Business Review, Sept-Oct*, 138-150.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary. (1974). *The Merriam-Webster dictionary*. New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc.

Thorpe, M. (2006). *Interaction and integration in computer-mediated teaching in higher education: Researching the combined impact of pedagogy and technology* (No. 2), 1-14. Retrieved July 30, 2006 from

http://www.kn.open.ac.uk/public/getfile.cfm?documentfileid=7060

Tisdell, E. J. (1998). Poststructural feminist pedagogies: The possibilities and limitations of feminist emancipatory adult learning theory and practice. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 48 (3), 139-156.

Tisdell, E. J. (2000). Feminist pedagogies. In E. Hayes & D. D. Flannery (Eds.), *Women as learners: The significance of gender in adult learning* (pp. 155-183). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Turkle, S. (1995). *Life on the screen: Identity in the age of the Internet.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Ubon, A. N., & Kimble, C. (n.d.). Exploring social presence in asynchronous text-based online

learning communities (OLCS) [Electronic Version]. Retrieved July 17, 2006 from:

http://www-users.cs.york.ac.uk/~kimble/research/cicte.pdf

Wagner, E. D. (1994). In support of a functional definition of interaction. *The American Journal

of Distance Education, 8*(2), 6-29.

Walker, K. (2003).Applying distributed learning theory in online business communications

courses. *Business Education Quarterly*, 66(2), 55-67.

Wall, L. (2004). *Women, distance education and solitude: A feminist postmodern narrative of

women's responses to learning in solitude.* Unpublished Masters thesis. Athabasca

University, Athabasca.

Weber, S. J. (1986). The nature of interviewing. *Phenomenology + Pedagogy, 4*(2), 65-72.

Weedon, C. (1987). *Feminist practice and poststructural theory*. Cambridge MA: Blackwell

Publishers.

Weedon, C. (1999). *Feminism, theory, and the politics of difference*. Oxford UK: Blackwell

Publishers.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press.

Xin, C. (2012). A critique of the community of inquiry framework. *The Journal of Distance

Education*, 26 (1).

Yates, S. J. (1997). Gender, identity, and CMC. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning, 13*, 281-

290.

Yeaman, R. J. (1996). Postmodern and poststructural theory. In D. H. Jonassen (Ed.), *Handbook of research for educational communications and technology* (pp. 3-18). New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan.

Yick, A., Patrick, P., & Costin, A. (2005). Navigating distance and traditional higher education: Online faculty experiences. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 6* (2), 1-18.

Yoder, J. D., & Kahn, A. S. (2003). Making gender comparisons more meaningful: A call for more attention to social context. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 27*, 281-290.

Zembylas, M. & Vrasidas, C. (2005). Levinas and the "inter-face": The ethical challenge of online education. *Educational Theory, 55* (1), 61-78.

Zipin, L. (1998). Looking for sentinent life in discursive practices: The question of human agency in critical theories and school research. In T.S. Popkewitz & M. Brennan (Eds.), *Foucault's challenge: Discourse, knowledge and power in education* (pp. 316-347). New York: Teachers College Press.

Appendix A

Institutional Request for Research

Dear

I am writing to ask for permission to apply for ethics approval from [your institution] to access female students enrolled in a graduate online program for my doctoral research project. I am a graduate student at the University of Alberta in the Department of Educational Policy Studies, within the Faculty of Education. I am also a graduate of the MDE Program at Athabasca University. For my doctoral dissertation I will continue the work I began as a Master's student, studying the online interactions in a text-based forum. For my doctoral work, I will be conducting research on the processes involved in negotiating identities online, and its influence on learning. Specifically, I am interested in studying women's experiences learning in an online text based context, and to gain a greater understanding of how women construct online identities and come to understand themselves and others in this learning environment. It is my wish to access female students in the [targeted] program. It is my desire to interview the female participants in this program. Ethics approval for this research has been granted by the University of Alberta. Following is a more detailed outline of the proposed procedures for this study.

All female students enrolled in this course will be sent an information letter outlining my research interests. Female students interested in participating in the interview process will be sent a consent form, which can be returned to me by fax or e-mail. Once I have received the consent form I will e-mail a pre-interview question for them to consider prior to our meeting. This activity will give the students an opportunity to reflect on their experiences prior to the interview session. Participation will involve one interview session (and possibly a follow-up interview, if

required) that will be audio-taped, transcribed and of not more than 60 minutes. Interviews can be arranged face-to-face if students living within the Edmonton area so desire, otherwise I will conduct the interviews by telephone. In either case, I will schedule a time and format that is convenient for them. They will also be asked to verify a transcript of their interview. I expect to focus the interviews on their learning, interactions, and experiences in this online learning context, and on the ways that they have come to understand themselves and others in this environment. The information provided will be considered confidential and your anonymity will be protected through the use of pseudonyms, and the course will not be identified by the institution, or by its designator, name, or number. Students will be informed of their opportunity to opt out of this research study in the initial information e-mail, as well as in the consent form for interview participants. Interview participants will also be reminded prior to the first interview that when they agree to participate in the study, they can subsequently exercise the right to opt out at anytime. They will also be informed that this decision to opt out can be exercised at any time prior to June 30, 2011. To withdraw this consent, participants will be required to inform the researcher of this intent via e-mail. The date at which the withdrawal of research data is no longer feasible is August 30, 2011.

 It is hoped that what is learned from this research study will give researchers, learning professionals, learners, and organizations insights into the many issues and challenges that accompany learning online.

Thank you for your consideration. If you have any further questions I would be happy to talk to

you by telephone or e-mail, or you may contact my supervisors, Dr Margaret Haughey at

mhaughey@athabascau.ca, or Dr. Janice Wallace at wallacej@ualberta.ca.

Sincerely,

Carmen Lawlor

Telephone: 780 960-2333
e-mail: lawlor@hotlinkwireless.com
fax: 780 960-4879

The study is in compliance with the University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants. Its plan has been reviewed for adherence to ethical principles and approved by the U of A Faculty of Education Research Ethics Board, and by the Athabasca University Research Ethics Board. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact:
University of Alberta

- REB member for the Department of Educational Policy Studies, Dr. Jorge Sousa at sousa@ualberta.ca.

Appendix B

Information Letter to Instructors

Dear

I am a graduate student in the Department of Educational Policy Studies within the Faculty of

Education. I am also a graduate of the MDE Program at Athabasca University. For my doctoral

dissertation I will continue the work I began as a Master's student, studying the online

interactions in a text-based forum. For my doctoral work, I will be conducting research on the

processes involved in negotiating identities online, and its influence on learning. Specifically, I

am interested in studying women's experiences learning in an online text based context, and to

gain a greater understanding of how women construct online identities and come to understand

themselves and others in this learning environment. I am hoping the female students in your

course will be willing to share their experiences in this area with me. To do this I plan to

interview a number of female students enrolled in this program.

All female students enrolled in this course will be sent an information letter outlining my

research interests. Female students interested in participating in the interview process will be sent

a consent form, which can be returned to me by fax or e-mail. Once I have received the consent

form I will e-mail a pre-interview question for them to consider prior to our meeting. This

activity will give the students an opportunity to reflect on their experiences prior to the interview

session. Participation will involve one interview session (and possibly a follow-up interview, if

required) that will be audio-taped, transcribed and of not more than 60 minutes. Interviews can

be arranged face-to-face if students living within the Edmonton area so desire, otherwise I will

conduct the interviews by telephone. In either case, I will schedule a time and format that is convenient for them. They will also be asked to verify a transcript of their interview. I expect to focus the interviews on their learning, interactions, and experiences in this online learning context, and on the ways that they have come to understand themselves and others in this environment. The information provided will be considered confidential and your anonymity will be protected through the use of pseudonyms, and the course will not be identified by the institution, or by its designator, name, or number. Students will be informed of their opportunity to opt out of this research study in the initial information e-mail, as well as in the consent form for interview participants. Interview participants will also be reminded prior to the first interview that when they agree to participate in the study, they can subsequently exercise the right to opt out at anytime. They will also be informed that this decision to opt out can be exercised at any time prior to June 30, 2011. To withdraw this consent, participants will be required to inform the researcher of this intent via e-mail. The date at which the withdrawal of research data is no longer feasible is August 30, 2011.

 It is hoped that what is learned from this research study will give researchers, learning professionals, learners, and organizations insights into the many issues and challenges that accompany learning online.

Thank you for your support with this research project. If you have any further questions I would

be happy to talk to you by telephone or e-mail.

Sincerely,

Carmen Lawlor

Telephone: 780 960-2333
e-mail: lawlor@hotlinkwireless.com
fax: 780 960-4879

The study is in compliance with the University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants. Its plan has been reviewed for adherence to ethical principles and approved by the U of A Faculty of Education Research Ethics Board, and by the Research Ethics Board of your institution. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact:
University of Alberta

- REB member for the Department of Educational Policy Studies, Dr. Jorge Sousa at sousa@ualberta.ca, or

- The Research Ethics Board of your institution.

.

Appendix C

Information Letter to Student

Dear student,

I am a graduate student in the Department of Educational Policy Studies within the Faculty of Education. I am also a graduate of the MDE Program at Athabasca University. For my doctoral dissertation I will continue the work I began as a Master's student, studying the online interactions in a text-based forum. For my doctoral work, I will be conducting research on the processes involved in negotiating identities online, and its influence on learning. As a student in the program I hope you will be willing to share your experiences in this area with me. Specifically, I am interested in studying women's experiences learning in an online text based context, and to gain a greater understanding of how women construct online identities and come to understand themselves and others in this learning environment. To do this I plan to interview a number of female students enrolled in this program. Support for this research project has been granted by the University of Alberta and [your institution].

If you are interested in participating you will be sent a consent form, which can be returned to me by fax. Once I have received the consent form I will e-mail a pre-interview question for you to consider prior to our meeting. This activity will give you an opportunity to reflect on your experiences prior to the interview session. If you agree to be interviewed, your participation will involve one interview session (and possibly a follow-up interview, if required) that will be audio-taped, transcribed and of not more than 60 minutes. If you live in the Edmonton area we can arrange a face-to-face interview, otherwise I will conduct the interviews by telephone. In either

case, I will schedule a time and format that is convenient to you. You will also be asked to verify

a transcript of your interview. I expect to focus the interviews on your learning, interactions, and

experiences in this online learning context, and on the ways that you have come to understand

yourself and others in this environment. The information you provide will be considered

confidential and your anonymity will be protected through the use of pseudonyms, and the

course will not be identified by the institution, or by its designator, name, or number.

Once you agree to participate in the study, you can still subsequently exercise the right to opt out

at anytime. This decision to opt out can be exercised at any time prior to June 30, 2011. To

withdraw this consent, you will be required to inform me of this intent via e-mail. The date at

which the withdrawal of research data is no longer feasible is August 30, 2011.

Your insights as a learner are especially useful, as there is much to learn from the people actively

involved in an online learning experience. It is hoped that what is learned from this research

study will give researchers, learning professionals, learners, and organizations insights into the

many issues and challenges that accompany learning online.

If you would you be willing to share your experiences with me, please provide me with your intent by e-mail. My contact information is outlined below. I am also happy to talk to you by telephone or e-mail if you have further questions about the project. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Carmen Lawlor

Telephone: 780 960-2333

e-mail: lawlor@hotlinkwireless.com

fax: 780 960-4879

The study is in compliance with the University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants. Its plan has been reviewed for adherence to ethical principles and approved by the U of A Faculty of Education Research Ethics Board, and by the [targeted institution] Research Ethics Board. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact:
University of Alberta

- REB member for the Department of Educational Policy Studies, Dr. Jorge Sousa at sousa@ualberta.ca,

- Research Ethics Board of your institution.

Appendix D

Consent form for Students

Researcher: Carmen Lawlor

_____   **No**, I do not choose to participate in this study.

_____   **Yes**, I agree to participate in this study.

I consent to be interviewed about my online learning experiences as a student in the

[this]Program. I understand that the interview will be recorded and transcribed and that I will

be asked to verify the transcript of my interview. I understand that only the researcher will

have access to the content of the audio tapes, transcripts, or notes which will be kept in a

secure place, and that all computer data will be password protected and only available to the

researcher and the researcher's supervisor. If a transcriber is required, that person will sign a

confidentiality agreement.

I understand that the information I provide will be kept anonymous by not referring to me by

my name or location, but by using a pseudonym.

I understand that the information I provide may be used in papers submitted to refereed

journals and scholarly conferences but that my name will not be used and courses will not be

identified by designator or number.

I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time prior to June 30, 2011when

data analysis begins, or to refuse to answer specific questions, and/or to withdraw my

participation at any time without prejudice or penalty. I understand that I have the right to request that any of the information I have provided be withdrawn from the data base and not included in the study. I understand that participation in any aspect of the study is voluntary. I understand that this study poses no more risk or discomfort than everyday interaction. I may, in fact, benefit from reflecting upon my experience.

The study is in compliance with the University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants. Its plan has been reviewed for adherence to ethical principles and approved by the U of A Faculty of Education Research Ethics Board, and by the Research Ethics Board of your institution. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact:

University of Alberta

- REB member for the Department of Educational Policy Studies, Dr. Jorge Sousa at sousa@ualberta.ca, or
- The Research Ethics Board of your institution.

You may also contact me if you have any further questions or concerns. Carmen Lawlor: lawlor@hotlinkwireless.com; 780-960-2333). Please fax this consent form to Carmen Lawlor at 780 960-4879.

Name of participant (Please print)   _____

Signature of participant   _____
Date:_____

Signature of researcher: _____Date:_____

Appendix E

Pre-Interview Activities for Students

1. If someone were to make a movie about your experience learning in your online course, what key segments or scenes ought to be included?

2. Draw a diagram or pictures showing an important aspect of your experience learning and interacting in your online course.

3. Break down your experience of learning in this online course into stages and use key words to describe what each stage felt like and what its influence has been.

4. Draw a timeline showing the significant events in your experience as an online learner.

Appendix F

Interview Guide for Students

Student Demographics

    a. Number of online courses taken

    b. Previous online experience

    c. Prefer online or face to face learning contexts

    d. DOB

    e. Full-time or part-time student

    f. Full-time or part-time employment

    g. cultural heritage

    h. sexual orientation

Questions to Guide Interview

1. What factors do you take into consideration when making the decision to take a course face to face or online?

2. Did your learning/or experience surprise you in anyway? What happened that was unexpected?

3. What advice would you give someone who was considering enrollment in this course?

4. Describe your participation in the online discussions:

- What encourages you to jump in?

- What held you back from participating more?

- Was your participation with other learners or instructors in just the formal space? Elsewhere?

5. What do you see is your most important contribution to this community?

6. If you were to describe what the process is like of composing online postings and interacting in this context, what key ideas would you include?

7. Can you describe the online community in this course.

   - How do you fit in?

   - Where do you think others see you fitting in?

   - Are you conscious of projecting a certain online persona?

   - Is this different from your persona elsewhere?

   - Are you concerned about how others will perceive you?

   - Are there certain people you feel more comfortable/uncomfortable interacting with? Why?

8. Has your idea of who you are or how you are seen to be by others changed at all as a result of your experiences?

9. Has your self-image or sense of self been influenced by others in this forum?

10. Has your experience in this course changed your life in anyway? How? Why not?