

University of Alberta

Mixing Personal and Learning Lives:
How Women Mediate Tensions When Learning Online

by

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Abstract

Current statistics suggest women form the majority of online learners. Their enrollment levels may be a result of promotional materials suggesting online learning allows learners access to flexible learning opportunities that will complement their busy lives. This research questions those assertions by examining the tensions women experience while learning online. Using a poststructural feminist approach, tensions are defined as the messy spaces where complexities, contradictions and competing ideas, actions, expectations, values and emotions interact to produce opposition and opportunities. Research questions asks: How do women learning online mediate tensions in the learning environment and in their own personal context? What tensions do women face when learning online? What strategies do they use to address these tensions? Are they able to find ways to balance or overcome these tensions?

A poststructural feminist theoretical framework acknowledges the diversity of women's experiences and allows space for questioning discourse around lifelong learning, online learning, women's responsibilities, and institutional authority.

Data was collected using multiple methods: photo-elicitation interviews and an online focus group plus a demographic survey and autoethnography. Twelve women, who all completed at least two online courses, participated representing learners of different ages, marital and family situations, geographical locations, and level and field of study. Six women took photographs, which

formed the basis of face-to-face interviews. Six other women participated in an asynchronous online focus group.

Themes from the results showed the tensions they experience, namely, the blurring between the boundaries between home and school, the cost of flexibility, and three strategies they used for mediating tensions (multitasking, procrastinating and persevering). While the women acknowledged the benefits of online learning and demonstrated that they were successful students, their narratives make it clear that they faced challenges in attending to and completing their schoolwork to the standards they desired, while meeting family and work responsibilities.

A theoretical analysis explores how the poststructural feminist concepts of positionality and subjectivity are useful in examining women's experiences learning online and where there are gaps in applying this theoretical framework in online learning contexts.

Participants' narratives and photographs and the researcher's own autobiographical narrative are included.

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My children are inextricably linked with my doctoral studies. When I thought about pursuing doctoral studies, I was assured that many women choose to have children while in graduate school. I've heard that it takes a village to raise a child – and I now think that it also takes a village to write a thesis – especially when you have children. I am very grateful to have had my children and the village that they needed and I needed while I was writing my thesis.

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CHAPTER 1: POSITIONING MYSELF AND MY RESEARCH

Arriving at This Point

I come to this research from my own experiences as a woman learning online. During my Master's degree, I, unexpectedly, became an online learner while living on campus. This experience prompted me to take a critical look at my own experiences as an online learner. My resulting M.Ed. thesis research (see Blakey, 2003) questioned the assumptions that online learning is accessible, inclusive and interactive.

After further research, reading, discussion and exposure to online learning contexts throughout my doctoral studies and this research project, I am reconsidering my earlier assessments. I recognize the potential opportunities of online contexts for creating different educational environments. Some online learning courses and instructors I have experienced and learned about through my research do not represent my experiences where I felt isolated from my classmates and professors, and disengaged from the content. Other descriptions of online learning embodied new ways of collaborating, constructing knowledge and communicating. Yet, I still acknowledge the limitations of the online context, which creates a situation of tension: there are potential applications for online learning that can bring about new opportunities, yet there are also aspects of online learning that are constricting and limiting. With these contrasting views, I have begun to explore the many tensions that seem to be inherent in online learning.

Research Questions

My doctoral research examines women's experiences learning online in order to better understand tensions they experience while learning in an online learning environment and how they mediate those tensions. Specifically, my research question asks: How do women learning online mediate tensions in the learning environment and their own personal context? Subquestions ask:

- What tensions do women face when learning online?
- What strategies do they use to address the tensions?
- Are they able to find ways to balance or overcome these tensions?

To answer these questions, I explored the experiences of female learners using multiple qualitative research methods: photo-elicitation interviews and an online focus group, plus a demographic survey and autoethnographic reflections.

Defining Tensions

I define tensions as the “messy spaces where complexities, contradictions and competing ideas, actions, expectations, values and emotions interact to produce opposition and opportunities” (Kelland, 2008, p. 196). Other authors approach these tensions by referring to the need for students to “juggle” their activities, which can produce either “synergy” or “collisions” (Kazmer & Haythornthwaite, 2001, pp. 516, 517, 526). They describe how “women experience physical and emotional pushes and pulls when balancing demands on their time and energy” (Cragg, Andrusyszyn, & Fraser, 2005, p. 35). In response to these tensions, students feel the need to adopt uncomfortable or unfamiliar

behaviours in order to succeed academically (Burge, 1998). Researchers identify how women feel a “double bind” (Gordon, Iverson, & Allan, 2010, p. 86), work a “third shift” (Kramarae, 2001) or are pulled between competing “greedy institutions” (Rosalind Edwards, 1993). Learners respond by reconceptualizing time and place, and community, in learning contexts in order to meet their learning goals (Kazmer, 2005a; Servage, 2007; T. L. Thompson, Kelland, & Lawlor, 2007).

Defining Distance and Online Learning

It is important to define and distinguish between the related concepts of distance learning and online learning. Distance learning is the more inclusive of the terms, encompassing all forms of education where learner and instructor are separated by distance. In some situations, their interactions may also be separated by time (asynchronous communication); in others, they will not be separated by time (synchronous communication). Within the scope of distance learning, one may find print, audio, video and digital technologies ranging from correspondence courses, to teleconferencing and videoconferencing, to interactive web-based, online learning (Picciano, 2001). Moore and Kearsley (2005) define distance education by focusing on its characteristic as a form of formal learning, thereby eliminating informal learning from their definition:

Distance education is all planned learning that normally occurs in a different place from teaching, requiring special techniques of course design and instruction, communication through various technologies, and

special organization and administrative arrangements. (Moore & Kearsley, 2005, p. 2 as cited by Moore, 2007, p. x)

However, even with a simple, clear definition, distance learning can still encompass many different practical applications. According to the Commonwealth of Learning [COL] (2000), the following terms describe different forms of distance learning: “correspondence education, home study, independent study, external studies, continuing education, distance teaching, self-instruction, adult education, technology-based or mediated education, learner-centred education, open learning, open access, flexible learning and distributed learning” (p. 2). The terms *distance learning* or *distance education* are commonly used in Canadian contexts while European institutions prefer the term *open learning*, which also implies less restrictive policies that value flexibility and accessibility in admission requirements, delivery method and access to support services. The term *online and distance learning* or *ODL*, is also commonly used in Europe, and it is defined by the COL as

a way of providing learning opportunities that is characterised by the separation of teacher and learner in time or place, or both time and place; learning that is certified in some way by an institution or agency; the use of a variety of media, including print and electronic; two-way communications that allow learners and tutors to interact; the possibility of occasional face-to-face meetings; and a specialised division of labour in the production and delivery of courses. (2000, p. 23)

Distance education has evolved rapidly as mass media and technology

have allowed, from first generation (correspondence courses), through second generation (television and radio broadcasted programs), third generation (audio and video teleconferencing) and fourth generation (computer conferencing). Now, Anderson (2008) claims, “The early twenty-first century has produced the first visions of a fifth generation – based on autonomous agents and intelligent, database-assisted learning” (p. 2). However, he points out that each new generation does not mean the death of previous methods of communication, rather the fifth generation continues to co-exist with all four previous generations. The result is that there are many ways of delivering distance education; and online learning, which could be considered a type of fourth or fifth generation distance learning, could include a range of different delivery methods.

Online learning is also described and defined in different ways. Thompson (2007) states, “Let us accept that e-learning is the current ‘term of art’ for an activity whose name belies its true complexity: a form of education characterized by a multi-faceted, interactive system of structures, activities, responsibilities, and stakeholders that is networked to minimize physical and psychological distance” (p. 166). Online learning is also described as “e-learning, Internet learning, distributed learning, networked learning, tele-learning, virtual learning, computer-assisted learning, Web-based learning, and distance learning” (Ally, 2004, p. 4). It refers specifically to distance learning situations where computer-mediated communication and Internet technology bridge the distance and time that divide learners and instructors: “[online learning is] the use of the Internet to access learning materials; to interact with the content, instructor, and other learners; and

to obtain support during the learning process, in order to acquire knowledge, to construct personal meaning, and to grow from the learning experience” (Ally, 2004, p. 5). Online learning may have synchronous components, such as audio and video conferencing and chatting, and asynchronous components such as e-mail messages, web discussion forums, mailing lists, web sites, blogs (online journals or “web logs”) and wikis (collaboratively constructed databases).

While distance education was often a “relatively minor, often marginalized, activity conducted by a small group of educators dedicated to broadening access to educational programming to unserved or under-served populations of students” (M. M. Thompson, 2007, p. 160), e-learning is becoming part of the mainstream offerings of many institutions for both students who are on campus and blending online and face-to-face courses, and for students studying exclusively online at a distance. Thompson argues that adopting the name “e-learning” reflects “the world’s ever deepening love affair with technology in general” (p. 161) making it more appealing than “distance education” but also allowing educators to lose touch with the research and experience of more than a century of distance education. In response to this change in terminology,

Thompson argues that

whereas education is by definition a multi-faced activity understood to involve a variety of players and activities – teachers and teaching, students and studying, information, knowledge and, it is hoped, learning – e-learning is a term comprising one letter representing a physical property of technology (e for electronic) and the *hoped-for* outcome (learning) for one

participant in the interaction. (M. M. Thompson, 2007, p. 162, italics in original).

I chose to use the term online learning to describe the learning I am examining because the content delivery is occurring “online” and because the goal is “learning” and I have no doubt the women in this study have learned from and through their experiences.

The labels used to describe online and distance learning carry with them assumptions about the relative quality of the learning. Historically, distance education has been devalued (M. M. Thompson, 2007). It has been viewed as less rigorous, of lower quality, and a second-class education (Cooper, 2004; Perraton, 2000). This perception persists as some institutions are hesitant to label course delivery methods on transcripts because different delivery methods “may be interpreted as a statement on relative quality of courses” (Varvel, Montague, & Estabrook, 2007, p. 270). Others also predict the creation of “digital diploma mills” (Noble, 1998). Online learning can also be perceived as “a good option – or at least a compromise – for women with children and without much free time” (Kramarae, 2007, p. 175).

Nonetheless, online learning has become an accepted and valued method of delivering education. As Thompson (2007) points out, e-learning is not a particularly new or unique concept; it builds on a foundation of educational research and practice. It is used in primary and secondary settings (see for examples, Alberta Distance Learning Centre, 2010), and in both credit and noncredit programs at college and universities across Canada (see for examples

Canadian Virtual University [CVU], 2010) and around the world. It is used to deliver content as diverse as dance (Garland & Naugle, 1997), military arts and sciences, nursing and languages (CVU, 2010).

Positioning My Research

My theoretical perspective for this research draws on poststructural feminist understandings of gender, learning and research. This theoretical approach values the diversity of women's experiences as they are shaped by the intersections of individual subjectivities, including gender, race, class, age, sexual orientation, ability, and family situation (Flannery & Hayes, 2000; Tisdell, 1995). Women's experiences are also shaped by characteristics of the academic program they are pursuing, institutional policies and procedures, and characteristics of professors instructing their courses. The diversity of perspectives that emerge from these different contexts makes it impossible to define and describe a universal experience of a woman learning online (Hayes & Flannery, 2000; Strega, 2005; Tisdell, 2000). Rather than seeking a unifying experience, I appreciate the understandings that can come from looking at women's different experiences. By using a poststructural approach that is "informed by the progressive politics of feminism" (Strega, 2005, p. 226), women's interactions with and within power relationships and social structures can be questioned.

Based on my theoretical perspective, I have conducted my research using photo-elicitation interviews and an online focus group. These interpretive research methods allow me to gain deeper knowledge about each individual participant's

experiences as an online learner (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, 2005; Merriam, 1993). Initially, I collected data face-to-face through photo-elicitation interviews (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004; Hurworth, 2003; Taylor, 2002). Participants took pictures that represent the tensions they experienced as online learners. These pictures then formed the basis for a conversation in which the visual narratives that the pictures represent were used to explore the tensions that each woman experienced and how she mediated those tensions. Next, I invited a different group of women to participate in an asynchronous, online focus group where they reflected on their experiences in a dynamic and collaborative dialogical analysis (Mann & Stewart, 2000). This component allowed participants to reflect on emerging themes from the interviews and to discuss how their experiences were similar to or different from those of other participants. Multiple approaches to data gathering and analysis included face-to-face and online components; one-on-one and group exploration; oral, written and visual expression; and individual and collaborative knowledge construction, which served to provide depth and authenticity to the data, and to crystallize themes (Creswell & Maietta, 2002; Olesen, 2000; Richardson, 1994).

The literature supports the need for a feminist examination of women's experience learning online. Men dominate positions in the information technology (IT) and computer science fields that develop hardware, software and educational training materials for online learning (Kramarae, 2001; Kramarae & Wei, 2002; Marcelle, 2006; Statistics Canada, July 24, 2003; Van Dusen, 2000; Woodbury, 2002), positions in post-secondary institution administration (Berkowitz, 2005;

Kramarae, 2001), and positions in technical support for online learning programs (Currie, 1993). Furthermore, instructional design is usually based on a “male, patriarchal communication paradigm that focuses on data and rationality rather than relationships” (Burgess, 2009, p. 63), and both the processes and products of technology design are gendered (Bratteteig, 2002; Woodbury, 2002). Yet, the target audience for these programs is often women (Kramarae, 2001; von Prümmer, 2000). In fact, distance-learning classes in Canada have historically included a large proportion of female learners. In the late 1980s women represented about half of Canadian distance learners and a third of international distance learners (Burge, 1998; Faith, 1988). By the mid to late 1990s they formed the majority of distance learners in Canada (M. M. Thompson, 1998). More recent statistics about online learning show that, in Canada, women continue to represent the majority of learners (Athabasca University, 2010a; Télé-Université, 2003-2004), a trend that is also seen in the United Kingdom (Price, 2006) and the United States (Wanless-Sobel, 2006). Furthermore, female learners are choosing online learning and succeeding in reaching their educational objectives (D. M. Anderson & Haddad, 2005; Cragg, et al., 2005; Gunn, McSporran, Macleod, & French, 2003; Müller, 2008), despite facing additional challenges in completing their education due to their family and work responsibilities, which impact how, when and why they pursue further education through online learning (Cragg, et al., 2005; Gouthro, 2009; Kramarae, 2001; von Prümmer, 1994).

Meanwhile, online learning is becoming more established in Canadian academic and workplace learning contexts, a trend that is expected to continue (Advisory Committee for Online Learning, 2001; Moore, 2007; Stolte, 2010). Demand for continuing education courses offered at a distance is expected to grow at as much as ten times the demand for on-campus courses (Burns, 2006). Clearly, there is a need to examine women's experiences in online learning environments in order to incorporate approaches that address their diverse needs as learners.

In response to the growth of online learning, there have been numerous calls for research from feminist perspectives and research that examines women's experiences because of the increasing number of women learning online (Campbell, 2006; Gunn, et al., 2003; Kramarae, 2001; Morgan & Morgan, 2007). It is in this context that I undertake my study of the tensions women experience when they are learning online.

Outline

In the following chapters, I will explore poststructural feminism as a theoretical framework that shapes this research (chapter 2), photo-elicitation interviews and an online focus group as methodologies for conducting this research (chapter 3), literature about women learning online (chapter 4), the themes that I identified in this research about online learning (chapter 5) and the tensions women experience when learning online (chapter 6), a theoretical analysis (chapter 7) and concluding comments (chapter 8).

Following each chapter there are narrative vignettes, which are thematic narratives of each of the women who participated in this study. I created these found narratives by organizing the participants' own words from the interview and focus group transcripts. There are more details about how these vignettes were created near the end of my methodology chapter. The vignettes include both text and photographs as ways of telling these women's stories. The vignettes are organized into groups based on demographics of the participants: (1) young women without children, (2) moms with young children, (3) women who are both working at home and studying at home, (4) a woman working outside the home while studying, (5) women completing doctoral studies online, and (6) a woman who is retired. Following the last chapter, excerpts of my own narrative as an online learner are included.

**YOUNG WOMEN LEARNING ONLINE: NICOLE, AMY AND
MICHELLE**

Nicole¹

Program: MA – in progress when she was interviewed

Personal situation: Age 34, married, no children

Employment: Yoga instructor

Previous/Concurrent Online Experience: Previously worked online as an editor. She had previous online learning experience from a non-credit online writing program where she connected with classmates and an online mentor after a two-week face-to-face workshop.

“2 days a week from September to April, I’m online”

There are small classes. There are only about 6 or 7 people in the class. We do the work on an asynchronous forum. Our class is slotted into about 2 or 2 ½ days of time. So we’re posting especially during these 2 or 2 1/2 days per week. So let’s say my class was running Mondays and Tuesdays, there would be a topic for discussion and assignments and presentations and things and we would be contributing and participating during those 2 days. It’s very intensive for 2 days. In a 3 hour a week class, whether it’s 3 hours a night or 1 hour three times a week, there’s only so much you can cover and we just cover way more online in a week. Online, I’m definitely spending more than 3 hours a week in discussions.

¹ The names of the participants used in the text are all pseudonyms.

Sometimes we're all posting at the same time and we're aware of our postings and that we're online at the same time. Other times there would be a lag of a couple of hours while someone came home from work or dropped their kids off and then joined the discussion. During the rest of the week we're doing our own work so we're doing our readings, writing and assignments. Sometimes we'll do a posting if we have questions for each other or the instructor.

“There are so many more comments, so many more contributions than you'd have in person.”

In a face-to-face class everyone's raising their hands, saying ideas and then forgetting what they wanted to say or not saying it clearly enough and feeling misunderstood after class. But, online people are wording it really carefully so they get to say exactly what they wanted to say. Then I have time to read through it and really reflect on what they said: What part of it do I agree with? What part don't I agree with? Why not? I get to really reflect on it before responding.

If you're studying in person, you're madly trying to take notes as people make comments in class and you can't read your writing afterwards and you can't cover it all and you're not even sure who said what. Online I can go back through the notes of the past days or months or year and find exactly who said that and read it over again and ask them “when you said this, what did you mean by this” and clarify things.

“Actually, I got more into teaching yoga because of the online work”

Before [starting this program] I was editing online. So I was an editor, but that was too intense because not only was it more online in addition to my schoolwork but it was also more of the same, like just words and letters and typos and rephrasing paragraphs and such and too much of the same work. So that really didn't work and I was so physically sore from sitting. No matter how many times I tried and reorganized the ergonomics of my chair and ball and keyboards, I was getting so cramped and sore from being online that much that I realized that I had to do more and more yoga and then I ended up teaching more classes and now it's my main thing.

I tried one year having my yoga class and stuff not on the same days as my [classes]. But then found I was just running around 7 days a week and working so hard. So then I tried another year congesting them together so I'd run out, teach a yoga class, come back, then I'd check my stuff online, run out do another class, come back, and put some more posting. I was so blasted out by the end of those days. So I think that it doesn't matter how I organize my days.

I think it's a big saviour that I get up and go teach a class. On the days where I don't have to teach any yoga then I get totally obsessed and just keep working, working, working. And, it's really, really bad. I think it's a saviour that I have to go out and teach a class and stretch.

I guess I have a lot more body awareness so I notice what's happening posturally (sic) and I'm able to do some stretches part way and deep breathing and things like that. I think a big thing that for a lot of people that gets left behind

when they're doing school is exercise. So I feel lucky that my job includes that. In addition I really love the other instructors where I teach and the students. I just love them so it's actually very social so I feel like I get that social fix. I'm extroverted and I like people so I think that's a bit of a blessing too during the day 'cause I get my fill.

“This is our messy calendar”

The months where I'm doing my school it's not blocked in back-to-back like that, full of ink and activities and it's noticeably fuller when I'm not taking class. In addition it works the other way too: whatever activities I do have here [I feel] there's always pulling away from my schoolwork and then I feel like I have to make up time earlier in the morning or later at night or in a time block where I wouldn't want to be working.

Amy

Program: Speech Assistant Certificate program – coursework was completed but not all assignments or practicum

Personal situation: Age 25, engaged

Employment: Working in a playschool

Previous/Concurrent Online Experience: No online experience before starting this program but she did take some distance education courses prior to and during this program.

“It’s overwhelming”



Figure 1. Amy’s photo of her binders.

This is one of my binders, a CD that we had to burn for the video and then two of my textbooks. So I guess when I look at this picture it’s overwhelming.... So it’s a lot right now. And I actually sent an email to the prof that was responsible for our last class and they’ve taken into account what I said and they’re actually splitting up the class. So they’re making it two courses because it was so demanding on all of us. And that was really good.

I’m working full time and, and taking classes full time. It is very, very demanding. And I think the amount of time that I’ve been in school now without a break has been probably 3 years straight (except for when I was traveling) and I haven’t had a break even in the summer. And I’m ready for a break. I think my body and mind have almost shut off. And so I’m convincing myself now I need to keep going for a little bit longer and then I’ll be done.

Last May [about a year before the interview] I started doing a bridging course because I skipped the first year of the program. They kind of condensed a few courses into one course for people who have experience or a degree. So I did that from May to September, and then in September I started in three classes and then another three in the winter semester. And now I'm just doing two. And, I also took one [on campus] course semester at the University at night. Next, I'll get to do two, 7-week practicums from September until January.

Sometimes I want to say it's a little less work than studying at the university. It seems sometimes that it's a little less but I think it's because I end up cramming it more into one space whereas at the university the classes are distributed throughout week. I don't know if I'm more efficient or not. I think I went in this year trying to be more efficient. I said, "OK I'm doing this course work at home, everything's here. I don't have to go anywhere so there isn't the time of coming to University or going home." What I put into it is my time whereas in a lecture or a classroom there may be downtime. At home, I can stick to what they want me to study.

"Every penny goes to just making it"

I was working 2 jobs to pay for schooling, to pay for living here. The financial status right now is actually another burden. In the back of my mind even though I am working full time, every penny goes to just making it. That's very frustrating because I'm working so hard. Why can't I pay for everything and not be just making it?

You have to work unless you have someone there who's willing to support you. Financially, who can take 4 months off to do a practicum and not work? My fiancé said, "You know that I will be there for you." That was kind of the deciding factor of whether I would go back to work at my current position or do my practicum. So I've decided to do the practicum in the fall because then, come January, I can be in the field full time and it'll be really exciting. I'm really looking forward to next January.

"If I had a choice, I would have preferred to do it in-person"

I think I would have had more feedback in-person, even though the teachers have been very good at giving feedback. I think on a day-to-day basis I would have learned more and I would have got more out of the course if had I done it in person. But it was either do it online or not do it. So in that regard I was learning a lot rather than nothing. It's hard because it was a perfect program for the time when I needed to do it. And I did really well. I've gotten back my marks and they're great. So I can't complain that I didn't do well.

I would have preferred to study on campus. There was definitely not enough hands-on in the online program. I'm curious to know what extra I would have learned if I had been in class. But I also know that there is a lot of time that is not used well in class. So, I don't know, maybe I would have learned just the same. I think having a prof there in front of me, answering questions right away, that I might have retained more. I might have learned a little bit more of the

hands-on tools there, rather than just kind of doing it in the video and then getting feedback.

“I needed to do some videos tonight”



Figure 2. Amy's photo of her videocamera.

I videotape myself in different situations, and then I send the video off to my prof and then he evaluates it and then sends it back. I have been taping myself doing therapy sessions with another individual. And now with the sign language course, it's taping myself signing. It's really nice because we're actually physically doing it.

For me, it has been a blessing and a curse at the same time. We've had to do a number of videos in my last three classes, and the reason I say they were a curse at times was due to the technology. This is a new course and so they're

working out the kinks. So we would try and upload our videos and things wouldn't work or the files were too big. So all of us were going through it all around Canada. I think they're working on it right now but in the end we had to go and burn a copy and actually mail it all the way across Canada. It would be so much quicker for them to get it on their computer. Then they can mark it. Instead, we have to wait for it to be sent back and forth.

So the good thing about it was actually having something a little more practical. And so I like it for that reason. At first, I obviously didn't like being recorded, but once I got the feedback from my prof, I realized how well I did on them. I didn't know what they were judging me on or what it looks like to them. They kind of judged it on mainly the content.

The feedback from the videos adds to this online learning when you're not seeing anyone face-to-face. With the online program I'm never sitting face-to-face with anyone. And in Speech Pathology you're dealing with conversation and how to work with people. Because we're not in a classroom, we weren't able to do the hands-on things that I think they would have liked us to do. So they opted to have us do a couple of videos to give us the feel for the work. It's such a hands-on field and you're supposed to be working with so many people, yet you're studying alone. And so it was kind of odd in that way. And so these videos, as weird as they were to do at times, were really essential.

The feedback I got was phenomenal. I wasn't expecting such in-depth feedback because it's hard for them to evaluate. They're not seeing me, and they

don't necessarily know who I am. But even without meeting me, they really made me feel great knowing what they got from the video.

They planned to have a film festival at the end of the course. And so we would give them permission to post our video for the class. If we didn't want it shared, the prof would just look at your video. But they encouraged everyone to put their video out there so people could watch them. In the last class we were supposed to share them, but we couldn't do it because the technology wasn't working, so I haven't seen any.

Michelle

Program: Masters of Distance Education – in progress at time of focus group

Personal situation: Age 34, single, no children, learning disabilities

Employment: on leave from teaching, involved in various arts projects

Previous/Concurrent Online Experience: some online undergraduate courses, distance education courses during undergrad and correspondence courses in high school

“I actually cannot relate to the women who manage a family, a career, and online studies”

I feel my demographics and lack of family life mean that I have a completely different profile to the other brilliant women here. I do not have a family, I live alone, and I currently do not work full time. I can still barely

manage to keep up with all of my projects. I never find time for housework. I am very disorganized and I am rarely efficient in my use of time. I wish I could be more organized and tidy, but I seem almost challenged in this respect. So I actually cannot relate to the women who manage a family, a career, and online studies.

I am also very busy but in a different way. I currently dance professionally from 9 to 5 pm, I am organizing a festival, directing and acting in two plays, and choreographing and rehearsing dance pieces. I am not studying this term because I have too much on my plate. Last term, I danced professionally from 9 to 5 and studied in the evening. At the weekend, I leave Toronto and return to the smaller city where I have an apartment.

I try to make to-do lists and schedules, and I still find it hard. It may be interesting to note that I have health problems and learning disabilities, but I tend to do well academically despite these challenges.

When I started my online masters degree program, I was teaching full time. On top of this, I was directing a play and acting in it, I was dancing occasionally, and I was a board member in the local French association. I had a bad experience in my job, then fell ill so I am not working full time at the moment. This is a good thing for my health although it is most likely temporary.

Since adulthood, I have moved away from being a sequential, linear learner. I do many things at once, read many papers, but I usually write only one paper at a time. I can spend twenty to thirty hours on a paper, and focus for hours on end, without really having a schedule. When I was younger, I was efficient at

making schedules, learning sequentially, and finishing in advance. I wonder if my use of the Internet has changed my approach to learning and studying.

Many people cannot comprehend my eclectic approach. Some find it interesting or artistic, and assume I understand my way around my mess (sometimes I do, sometimes I don't), but others just do not get it. I find this a little annoying, but I guess I am pleased that the work I produce is usually decent, so I must be doing something right.

“I enjoy participating in online forums”

It took me a few terms to become accustomed to this teaching-learning strategy. I think I experienced something similar when I was part of an online feminist/minority women's community in Asia. It took me years to start contributing. At first, I only read the discussions. In my second online course, participation became mandatory. I found this to be an additional stress and I felt more pressure. I wanted to make sure my contributions were somewhat scholarly, well-reflected, and written properly. Because of this additional pressure, I knew I would have to invest a reasonable amount of time. I eventually adjusted to this requirement. Now, I think I quite like the forum interaction element. I particularly like the fact that I DO NOT KNOW my colleagues personally. I like the relative anonymity. I feel freer... I feel free of some of the tensions I experience in groups. That said, there still are tensions in the online forums, as tone sometimes implies certain social dynamics, such as arrogance, sloppiness, etc. Despite all this, I do think that there is a risk of wasting time in the forums. Some

contributions are not as rich as others, the writing is sometimes very poor, or some contributions are inaccurate or show a misunderstanding of course readings.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: POSTSTRUCTURAL FEMINISM

Arriving at a Poststructural Feminist Approach

My understanding of women's experiences as learners has evolved over the course of my graduate studies. I learned about feminist and critical theories during my Master's degree, and came to appreciate them as tools for examining my experiences as a learner and how gender and power structures shaped those experiences. During my doctoral studies, I have learned to use poststructural approaches, of which there are many (Allan, Iverson, & Ropers-Huilman, 2010b; Lather, 2007), to explore the diversity of experiences of other learners. By drawing on poststructuralism and poststructural feminism to redefine my feminist perspective, I have recognized that all learners' experiences are unique, which allows me to see more complexity in learning environments. It allows me to have a more nuanced understanding of power relationships, which shift with changes in context. It challenges me to look at my assumptions about "women" as a category and about "online" and "learning" as subjects by highlighting how each word shapes and is shaped by my ongoing exploration of these topics. Therefore, I have chosen to use a poststructural feminist theoretical approach in my work because it allows me to recognize that women are multiple subjects who occupy an array of positions, which sometimes compete in relation to life, learning and work. Within these multiple roles and positions, women experience competition, conflict and coordination of values, priorities, responsibilities, activities and expectations – all

of which create tensions. My interest is in what tensions arise for women learning online and how they mediate those tensions.

However, at first glance, it appears a poststructuralist approach may not provide the theoretical context for challenging existing power structures. So, I am focusing on gender, consistent with what Luke and Gore (1992a) describe as “feminist theory and politics which ground our poststructuralist theorizing” (p. 9). This particular theoretical perspective shaped my research questions, my choice of methodology, my approach to data analysis and how I present my findings. In this chapter I will describe my understandings of poststructural feminism and my rationale for choosing this approach.

Setting the Context

Poststructuralism developed in response to humanism, and from there, poststructural feminism developed to address feminist concerns through the application, modification and reconstruction of poststructural theories (St. Pierre, 2000; St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000a). It should be noted that poststructuralism also critiques the structures that exist in other systems and ways of understanding the world including capitalism (K. P. Hughes, 1995), liberal feminism and structuralism (Glazer-Raymo, 2010), and Marxist theory, which attributes inequalities and oppression to distinctions of class (Sarup, 1993; Weedon, 1997). In the following section, I will examine how poststructural feminism is a response to humanism, with the understanding that it can and is used in many other contexts as well.

Poststructural feminism offered an alternative to the essentialist view of humanism², which focused on a search for universal truth and knowledge often using principles of positivism to establish criteria for evaluating truth (Agger, 1991; Lather, 1991; Sarup, 1993; St. Pierre, 2000). Humanism perceives an individual as “a conscious, stable, unified, rational, coherent, knowing, autonomous, and ahistoric” being (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 500). In contrast poststructural feminism looks at women’s individual subjectivities and positionalities to explore power relationships that are continually shaping and shaped by individuals (St. Pierre, 2000). Individuals or subjects in poststructural feminism are “precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time [they] think or speak” (Weedon, 1997, p. 32). Discourse is an important concept in poststructural feminist understandings because it explains the way written and oral language as well as unwritten and unspoken texts shape social structures and control behaviours within a society (Allan, et al., 2010b; St. Pierre, 2000).

Poststructural feminists also theorize about power differently from humanist theorists. Poststructural feminists see power as an element that is present in all relationships and interactions (English, 2005; Strega, 2005). Power is available to all individuals in different forms, depending on the context and on their own subjectivities. Power is not necessarily a coercive or dominant force; it

² “Humanism: An ethical doctrine that asserts the central importance of human life and experience on earth and the right and duty of each individual to explore and develop their potential. Humanism is, to some extent, in opposition to religious doctrines, like Christianity, that diminish the importance of earthly life and assert that human existence is merely a stage of preparation for heavenly life after death. In the social sciences humanism is evident in those groups who argue that social theory must conceive of the human actor as a subject rather than an object.” (Drislane & Parkinson, n.d.)

can be a productive and creative force, which is neither inherently positive nor negative (Allan, et al., 2010b; Foucault, 1980; St. Pierre, 2000). In this way, women learning online experience different expressions of themselves as subjects and different experiences of oppression and privilege as they navigate between their multiple roles of partner/spouse, to employee and/or educator and/or employer, to student, to mother and/or grandmother, to daughter, to volunteer, to community leader.

Poststructural Feminism

Poststructural feminism applies theories of poststructuralism with a focus on gender, in addition to race, class, ability, sexual orientation and other subjectivities, and uses them to explore how women occupy multiple, sometimes conflicting, roles in their lives, including working and learning contexts (Flannery & Hayes, 2000). Poststructural feminism offers alternatives to other feminist theories, which cannot explain the “appeal” of existing structures that are oppressive to women (Weedon, 1997, p. 18). However, poststructural feminism does not seek to replace humanism, nor does it claim to offer a better approach than humanism, nor to be able to address all concerns of feminists (Weedon, 1997), rather it “offers critiques and methods for examining the function and effects of any structure or grid of regularity that we put into place, including those poststructuralism itself might create” (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000a, p. 6).

Poststructural feminists analyze their experiences and those of other women by asking questions like “How does patriarchy function in the world? Where is it to be found? How does it get produced and regulated? What are its linguistic, social

and material effects on women? How does it continue to exist? What are its differences from itself?” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 486). Through these questions, poststructural feminists consider both “the forms of oppression and interests which divide women as well as those which women share” (Weedon, 1997, p. 11).

However, as St. Pierre and Pillow (2000a) point out, a poststructural feminist approach involves bringing together “two theories/movements [that] work similarly and differently to trouble foundational ontologies, methodologies, and epistemologies” (p. 2). The differences between these theories create tensions as feminism seeks social changes in “the daily lives of women and men by challenging patriarchy at every turn” while poststructuralism is a more academic approach to examining, and critiquing, the discourse that shapes individuals in their daily lives (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000a, p. 2). Feminism has a clearly political goal, while poststructuralism can be perceived as a nihilistic theory where there is no foundation for any critical approach (Collins, 2000; St. Pierre, 2000; St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000a). However, poststructuralism has been used as a theoretical approach by feminists (see Allan, Iverson, & Ropers-Huilman, 2010a; Luke & Gore, 1992b; St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000b for examples) albeit in some cases they are hesitant to identify themselves as poststructural feminists without some qualifications (Luke & Gore, 1992a; St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000a; Strega, 2005).

Despite these tensions, precedent has been established for using poststructural feminism as a tool to identify power relationships and to seek to change them. Poststructural feminists apply feminist principles within a

poststructural approach to analyze the discourse of patriarchy in order to challenge it (Luke & Gore, 1992a; St. Pierre, 2000). Strega (2005) describes this approach as “poststructuralism [...] informed by the progressive politics of feminism” (p. 226) which provides a foundation for social justice work within a poststructural framework. Likewise, Flannery and Hayes (2000) point out that one objective of poststructural feminist research is to identify “how women are active agents in resisting oppressive forces and shaping their own lives and learning” (p. 15). In addition, Tisdell (1995) acknowledges that “examining power relationships and dealing with difference” are important elements of “feminist positional pedagogies,” which include poststructuralist pedagogies (p. 75). More concretely, Lather (2000) seeks to “[make] a difference in struggles for social justice” (p. 307) while challenging assumptions about universal truths and she argues that there is the possibility of emancipatory pedagogy even within “post-critical pedagogies” (Lather, 1992, p. 122). In these ways, poststructural feminists are already examining power relationships and seeking change, much as I am proposing to do.

Poststructuralism and Postmodernism

There are multiple understandings and uses of the terms *poststructural* and *postmodern* (Allan, 2010; Lather, 1993). Theorists both collapse together and differentiate between poststructuralism and postmodernism, and different approaches within each of these, so it is important to differentiate between them and define use of these terms. To clarify, I choose to focus on poststructuralism as defined by Lather (1991), who uses “*postmodern* to mean the larger cultural shifts

of a post-industrial, post-colonial era and *poststructural* to mean the working out of those shifts within the arenas of academic theory” (p. 4, italics in original). Therefore, poststructuralism is an academic and theoretical approach (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000a) to studying structures as texts and the discourses they produce and reproduce. Poststructuralism examines how knowledge, language, texts and meaning shape and reshape and are shaped by different social contexts (Agger, 1991; Allan, 2010). These theories are concerned with what comes “after structuralism” (Lather, 1993, p. 688), in other words, deconstructing “totalizing explanatory frameworks” (Lather, 2007, p. 5) and reflecting an “ongoing skepticism about humanism and its effects” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 507). In contrast to poststructuralism, postmodernism is more concerned with changes in culture, media and the arts (Agger, 1991; Sarup, 1993; St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000a). It describes social, cultural and political changes brought about by capitalism and technological changes, and is a response to the ideas of modernism.

Feminist poststructuralism is an academic theory, but it provides a useful position for examining women’s diverse experiences and for developing new approaches to bring about change for women (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000a; Weedon, 1997). Its practical application stems from its focus on the diverse lived experiences of women and critiques of those experiences, which then become opportunities to create new discourses and new experiences (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000a). As St. Pierre and Pillow (2000a) explain, poststructural feminists bring about change because they “ask questions that produce different knowledge and produce knowledge differently, thereby producing different ways of living in the

world" (p. 1). Therefore, as Hughes (1995) describes, poststructuralism is "founded on the notion of intervention and resistance and the desire to transform that which is oppressive" (p. 222).

Points of Tension

Poststructural feminism recognizes the complexity of individuals' experiences. It questions the use of restrictive categories and stable dichotomies, which define and limit options of women, of researchers and of theorizing. As an alternative, poststructural feminists "question the black-and-white notion of categories, suggesting that most of the world really exists in various shades of gray" (Tisdell, 2000, p. 170). Rather than seeing the world in terms of universal truths that apply to every person or situation, poststructural feminists recognize that there may be many different truths that coexist simultaneously in both rational and emotional understandings (Strega, 2005; Tisdell, 2000). The co-existence of multiple perspectives causes points of tension. These points of tension have the possibility of being resolved through negotiating shared meanings or understandings, but they do not need to be resolved. In fact, they may continue to exist, while shifting and changing as contexts change. I believe similar tensions are found within individual women's lives, where different, and possibly oppositional, beliefs and actions can coexist.

Defining a Poststructural Feminist Perspective

I approach my research first from a feminist perspective consistent with Hayes and Flannery (2000), who point out that "women's learning must be

understood and valued in its own right” (p. xii). The experiences of women should not need to be compared to or contrasted with the experiences of men in order to be considered significant, nor should women’s experiences be measured against the standard of men’s experiences, a perspective that acknowledges the possibility that gendered differences exist in learning experiences because of social and economic factors, which influence women’s access, support, persistence, success and field of study. Addressing these differences, particularly when they prevent women from full participation in accessible and inclusive learning environments, is my primary concern.

To explore women’s experiences, I draw on a poststructural feminist approach. In other words, poststructural theories inform my feminist approach. This perspective seeks “understanding of the intersections of multiple systems of oppression and privilege” (Flannery & Hayes, 2000, p. 13). From this perspective, I can also examine power relationships that oppress and that privilege female learners. Drawing on theories, such as poststructuralism, helps to inform my thinking and provides tools for my examination of women’s experiences. As Luke and Gore (1992a) describe, I use poststructuralism because it allows me to examine notions of power and discourse. I choose to use it because “poststructuralist or postmodernist theoretical tenets have been helpful to the extent that they fit with [my] feminist political project(s) and [my] attempts to construct pedagogies” (p. 5). Writings about poststructural and feminist pedagogy, and poststructural feminism and some of the key concepts of poststructural feminism that are particularly useful in this framework are

examined below, namely, poststructural feminist understandings of gender, power, knowledge, discourse, and women as learners.

Poststructural Feminist Understandings of Gender

Earlier theories of women's ways of knowing (see for example Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986, 1997), and humanist understandings of the world (St. Pierre, 2000), tended to essentialize the experiences of women and failed to problematize the concept of gender (Butler, 1999; K. P. Hughes, 1995; Strega, 2005). In contrast, St. Pierre (2000) explains, "because of the complexity of women's lives, [poststructural feminists] find it impositional to define one grand vision of liberation for all women" (p. 493). To suggest that all women need or want or seek the same "vision of liberation" fails to acknowledge their differences. Instead, it excludes those women who do not feel they are represented by this understanding of what it means to be a woman because they are of a different race or class (Butler, 1999).

The poststructural feminist recognizes both gender and sex as fluid concepts that are constructed and reconstructed through social and cultural structures. Poststructural feminists recognize that the concept of gender is itself socially constructed, meaning that it is not a fixed category, nor a duality (Butler, 1999, 2004; St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000a). Rather, the category of "women" is continually changing and continually subject to change, based on cultural and social expectations (Butler, 1999). Women learn about how to be women and what it means to be a woman through the roles they adopt in different areas of their lives (Hayes, 2000a). One benefit of this constant change is that there are

opportunities for the understandings of gender to change (Butler, 1999). Because gender is an “ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification” (Butler, 1999, p. 43) as discourses are deconstructed and as new discourses emerge.

Butler (1999) problematizes both the concepts of gender and sex, arguing that they are social constructions regulated through social processes. Gender, “the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes” (Butler, 1999, p. 10), is not based on physiological differences but on cultural expectations and social norms that define what is acceptable and that regulate what is unacceptable behaviour, appearance, and function (Butler, 1999; Pillow, 2000). Gender is regulated through “the production and normalization of masculine and feminine” (Butler, 2004, p. 42). In other words, it defines and maintains a binary of man/woman to the exclusion of other expressions of gender through processes within the medical, legal, military and psychiatric systems (Butler, 2004).

Through the expectations that gendered characteristics are associated with bodies of certain sexes, gender becomes “the apparatus of production whereby the sexes” (Butler, 1999, p. 11) are also socially constructed. Butler (2004) goes on to argue that human morphology, the physical structure of the body, is not a binary (male/female) but is better represented by a continuum including people who identify as intersexed and transsexual.

Pillow (2000) deconstructs the female physical body, and identifies it as a site of regulation and resistance. She also considers which bodies are visible and which remain hidden, as ways of understanding discourse about women and their

bodies. She acknowledges the “*messiness*” of the female body (p. 201, italics in original) particularly when the research focuses on the lived experiences of the body. Similarly, Shildrick and Price (1999b) describe the female body as “intrinsically unpredictable, leaky and disruptive” (p. 2). A focus on women’s physical bodies has been prompted by poststructural and postmodern feminist theorizing as they examine the body as a text or a site for inscription (Shildrick & Price, 1999b). The body is “marked not simply by sex, but by an infinite array of differences -- race, class, sexuality, age, mobility status” (Shildrick & Price, 1999b, p. 8), the same subjectivities that shape women and make their experiences unique. Theorizing the female body, from a poststructural feminist perspective, also serves to disrupt binaries of male/female, mind/body, subject/object, white/black and inside/outside, by showing that the female bodies are messy spaces, that they are fluid and ever changing, that they have different forms and functions, and that they do not conform to a single essential definition of “body.”

In online learning environments, the physical body is noticeably absent. While some learners have the opportunity to meet face-to-face as part of their programs, many never meet in person. They may post photos of themselves to create a feeling of connection (T. L. Thompson, et al., 2007; Walther, Slovacek, & Tidwell, 2001) or they may see/hear each other through videoconferences, but it also possible they will remain invisible to each other. In this way, online learning can mask diversity and make differences less apparent. Unless learners either specifically state or otherwise indicate that they are of a different cultural

background, that they have a disability or any other details about themselves (age, family status, employment status, sexual orientation), these subjectivities remain invisible. The physicality of the body, and all the information it represents (including body language), can remain unacknowledged online (Kelland, 2006b).

Identity, which includes gender, changes depending on which social structures are influencing the individual (Tisdell, 2000). Therefore, poststructural feminism approaches understanding at the level of individual women rather than as a collective, uniform group (Hayes & Flannery, 2000; St. Pierre, 2000). By attempting to group women into a category, the diversity of individuals can be lost: “the insistence upon the coherence and unity of the category of women has effectively refused the multiplicity of cultural, social, and political intersections in which the concrete array of ‘women’ are constructed” (Butler, 1999, pp. 19-20). The poststructural feminist approach acknowledges the differences between the experiences of individual women because their experiences are shaped in the intersection of “multiple systems of privilege and oppression” such as race, class, age, ability and sexual orientation (Tisdell, 1995, p. 61). The significance and relative importance of different categories change depending on the context or the intersection of these subjectivities so women experience privilege and oppression differently depending on the context (Flannery & Hayes, 2000; St. Pierre, 2000). As Weedon (1997) describes, the poststructural subject is “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to her world” (p. 32). Therefore, in poststructural thought, women’s individual experiences are valued for their

uniqueness rather than for conforming to a common understanding. In this way, the experiences of a single mother studying online at night so she can save on childcare costs, a recent high school graduate taking one online course because it is not offered by the university she is attending full-time, and a self-employed woman completing graduate studies online all offer equally valuable insight for understanding women's experiences with online learning.

Challenge of Creating a Unified Perspective

Because of their diverse understandings of what it means to be a woman, individuals may not necessarily be united by a common identity or by shared goals. In fact they may feel as if they are being separated from each other as different subjectivities are used to identify their unique experiences rather than their shared concerns (Collins, 2000; Flannery & Hayes, 2000; Hayes, 2000b). This experience has led some women to wonder “why is it that just at the moment when the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic?” (Hartsock, 1990, p. 163). However, this lack of a fixed definition provides the opportunity for “different, strategic possibilities for ethical, political and relational work” (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000a, p. 8) rather than limiting feminists to one restrictive approach to challenging patriarchy. In order to act as a group, poststructural feminists negotiate the formation of coalitions to address common concerns through dialogue (Butler, 1999; St. Pierre, 2000) without essentializing experiences or characteristics (Shildrick & Price, 1999a). They also need to acknowledge that members of the group will experience different oppression and

different privilege both within the group and outside it (Hayes, 2000b). However, groups of women can act as a unit to advance political concerns shared by members, if they can identify a common concern. Gajjala (2004) describes the challenges of developing online feminist community in two different contexts, one that focused on Third-World women's concerns and another that focused on women writing anthropology and ethnography. She struggles with concepts like "women-friendly" and "women-centered" (p. 75) and how they included and excluded people from the community. Despite her struggles with defining "women," the communities still thrive in their own ways as locations for cyberfeminists to interact: "Each of these lists has a list culture co-constructed by the various participant members, as well as nonparticipant members of the lists (based on the argument that silence shapes discourse)" (p. 70).

As a poststructural feminist researcher, I must remain attentive to the different subjectivities of women I read about in the literature and write about in my own research. It is important to acknowledge their unique backgrounds and experiences by describing how they are positioned as learners, mothers, employees, volunteers, wives or partners, and community members. It is also important to identify how intersections of race, class, age, sexual orientation, ability and gender influence their experiences of oppression and privilege as they participate in online learning. I do not claim to speak for these women – I allow them to speak by sharing their photos and narratives – and I acknowledge when I am speaking from my own experience by using first person (Hayes & Flannery, 2000).

Poststructural Feminist Understandings of Power

Power relationships can be defined and expressed through language and other social structures since both knowledge and power are “historically, socially, and culturally constituted” (Strega, 2005, p. 208). Poststructural feminists see power as existing in all relationships and interactions (English, 2005; Strega, 2005), and they see these relationships as fluid so power does not have to be perceived as negative (St. Pierre, 2000). As Foucault (1978) says power is not something that can be “acquired, seized, or shared, [it is not] something that one holds on to or allows to slip away; power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations” (p. 94). In this way, power does not belong to any one group, individual or organization: it is “everywhere and, at some level, [it is] available to all” (Ramazanoglu, 1993, p. 11). An individual’s perceived power and his/her actual power vary depending on the situation or “the intersections of multiple systems of oppression and privilege” (Flannery & Hayes, 2000, p. 13). Therefore, “there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between ruler and ruled as the root of power relations... no such duality extending from the top down” (Foucault, 1978, p. 94).

Because of the fluidity of power and its presence in all relations, a poststructural feminist view of power relationships rejects the critical theorist idea of empowerment. The concept of empowerment “presupposes (1) an agent of empowerment, (2) a notion of power as property, and (3) some kind of vision or desirable end state” (Gore, 1992, p. 56). Instead, due to the fluidity and contextual nature of power relationships, the poststructural feminist view of power

relationships posits that all individuals have agency, or the capacity to mediate power relationships (Gore, 1992; St. Pierre, 2000). Foucault (1978) explains that there are many opportunities for resistance within power relations: “just as the network of power relations ends by forming a dense web that passes through apparatuses and institutions, without being localized in them, so too the swarm of points of resistance traverses social stratifications and individual unities” (p. 96).

Resistance.

Individuals can resist dominant discourse or mediate power relations in different ways, and it is at the level of individuals where resistance occurs as individuals mediate the power relations that impact them in their own unique situations (St. Pierre, 2000). First, individuals have agency to choose and thereby to resist discourses by creating new discourses (Ramazanoglu, 1993). St. Pierre (2000) describes this new discourse or “reverse discourse” (Foucault, 1978, p. 101) as “one that circulates alongside patriarchal discourses and gains legitimacy as it works within and against their assumptions” (p. 499). In this way, groups that have historically been oppressed can “claim the power of marginality” (Collins, 2000, p. 43) by offering an alternative voice to the dominant discourse, one that decentres the dominant discourse by illustrating that it does not represent everyone’s experiences and by legitimizing experiences that are not represented by the dominant discourse. Second, when individuals question discourses and the choices available to them, individuals’ identities can shift and they can adopt new ways of acting in and interacting with the social structures around them (Tisdell,

2000). Third, they can also choose to act in ways that resist discourses (Strega, 2005). As St. Pierre (2000) explains

the space of freedom available to us is not at all insignificant, and we have the ability to analyze, contest, and change practices that are being used to construct ourselves and the world, as well as the practices we ourselves are using in this work of praxis. (p. 493)

However, acting in ways that do not conform to dominant discourses and power relations can be challenging. Women may choose not to resist or not to act even if they see that there is a space for change. First, it can be uncomfortable to point out how discourses shape experiences or offer an alternative way of being. Pointing out new ways of examining situations, particularly ones that oppose dominant ways of understanding the world, can evoke negative responses from classmates and instructors. In some cases, women decide to stay silent, to stay safe, or to avoid attention. In other cases, women choose silence as a form of resistance, though it may not produce any external changes (Hayes, 2000b). Second, learners must also decide what they are willing to risk in order to challenge dominant discourses. Challenging the authority of the instructor could potentially impact the grades they receive in a course. Depending on the context, a learner's grades can have material impact on his or her employment opportunities, salary, ability to receive credentials necessary for employment, access to scholarship or sponsorship funding, and access to other academic programs. Third, as participants in an education system, learners have been trained to comply with dominant discourses, which include accepting the

authority of the instructor. They are continually negotiating within the dominant discourse, which shapes their understandings of the world and their roles. Likewise, women in academia, whether students or academics, experience “training in how individuals *ought to behave and feel like behaving* as professionals and academics” (McWilliam, 2000, p. 165, italics in original). Fourth, a learner who challenges a professor’s authority may also face disciplinary power intended to ensure compliance with dominant discourses (Foucault, 1979). Surveillance is one form of disciplinary power (Brookfield, 2001; St. Pierre, 2000), which influences online learners because all of their online activities within the course management system are monitored and recorded. Their online interactions can then be used to evaluate them, and their awareness of this constant surveillance serves to regulate their behaviour (Boshier & Wilson, 1998). Fifth, it may require time, energy or other resources to challenge dominant discourse. Many women learning online are already negotiating multiple roles and responsibilities, and their learning is part of a “third shift” (Kramarae, 2001). Mediating multiple, possibly conflicting, roles can lead to a “double bind” leaving them with limited options (Gordon, et al., 2010, p. 90). Women have to decide where to invest their time, energy and money, and challenging dominant discourses may not be their first priority.

Changing power structures.

The recognition of the presence of power in gender relationships naturally leads some feminists to consider how to change these power structures. Through research and education, individuals and groups can identify power relationships,

describe and define them, question them and take action to change them (Flannery & Hayes, 2000). As Flannery and Hayes explain (2000), “scholarship for women is not simply an issue of pursuing scientific ‘truths’; it is a question of challenging the inequitable relationships of power and authority that continue to pervade educational scholarship and practice” (p. 7).

One of the arguments against poststructuralism is that it views all truths as equal thereby eliminating a political basis for social action (Collins, 2000; Strega, 2005). Some would argue that poststructuralism does not provide a foundation for challenging existing power relationships because that would require creating a hierarchy of experiences and asserting a universal truth – that a learning environment based on principles of ethics and equity would be better than another type of environment (Collins, 2000). However, in order to examine existing power relationships, and to bring about changes, I need to have a foundation from which to work and poststructural feminism provides that foundation: “In line with the feminist project of standpoint – standing firm on a politics of location and identity – poststructural feminisms do not disclaim foundation. Instead, they ground their epistemology on the foundation of difference” (Luke & Gore, 1992a, p. 7).

Poststructural Feminist Understandings of Knowledge

As St. Pierre (2000) points out, concepts of knowledge and truth are “implicated in each other in such complex ways” (p. 493) that they must be examined together. As previously mentioned, poststructuralist theories provide a critique of humanist and positivist understandings of knowledge and truth (K. P.

Hughes, 1995; St. Pierre, 2000). In poststructural feminist theories, there is no universal “Truth” since knowledge and truth are products of individual subjectivities within their social contexts (Strega, 2005; Tisdell, 2000), and finding a universal truth will not provide the answers “to end oppression and to create a just social world” (K. P. Hughes, 1995, p. 226). According to poststructural feminists “knowledge is always provisional, open-ended and relational” (Luke & Gore, 1992a, p. 7), and “truth is defined by the values, politics, and desires of problematics” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 498). Knowledge is subjective and situated, so each individual can generate knowledge and truth.

Poststructural feminists assert “the subject [...] is generally described as one constituted, not in advance of, but within discourse and cultural practice” (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000a, p. 6). Poststructural feminists understand that negotiated social structures and individual characteristics shape the way women experience their world. They see that “all knowledge is contextual, historical, and, penultimately, produced by rather than reflected in language” (Strega, 2005, p. 212). They acknowledge that truth and reality and language are socially constructed concepts (Tisdell, 1995; Weedon, 1997).

Poststructural feminists also acknowledge the continually changing nature of social structures: “Social relations [...] are continually renegotiated, both at the level of daily interactions and at the level of the broader social structures” (Flannery & Hayes, 2000, p. 15). These theorists examine social relationships and institutions that influence women’s experiences as learners. Women’s experiences in different social settings including family, work, school, religious organizations,

and social communities influence their understanding of themselves as women and their learning experiences, and these settings are all places for learning and research (Hayes, 2000a). It is in these experiences that the discourse and practices of patriarchy can be identified (St. Pierre, 2000). Women's experiences of daily life are also opportunities for learning because they provide a way to link theoretical concepts to real-life experiences (Tisdell, 1995). Therefore, everyday life does not imply consistency or predictability: "context and meaning in everyday life are posited as co-constructions, multiple, complex, open and changing, neither pre-given nor explainable by large-scale causal theories" (Lather, 1992, p. 123)

However, since knowledge is closely linked to power, some forms of knowledge are more commonly accepted (Foucault, 1979). When knowledge is accompanied by power, it is viewed as more acceptable and more valuable. Dominant discourses determine which version of "Truth" is sanctioned and which versions of "Truth" are excluded: "there is no single truth... but many different truths situated in different discourses, some of which are more powerful than others" (Ramazanoglu, 1993, p. 21).

The notion of multiple understandings of what is considered truth and knowledge can be challenging for learners who are familiar with positivist notions of these concepts. However, St. Pierre (2000) claims that women may be quicker to accept that there are multiple truths: "since [women] often do not participate in the construction of truth, they are not so attached to it" (p. 498). Online learners, particularly when they are from diverse backgrounds, have opportunities to

explore a wider range of perspectives than they might encounter in a face-to-face setting (Moore, 1998; T. L. Thompson, et al., 2007), if the educator provides opportunities for learners to acknowledge their differences, share from their unique perspectives, and learn from this diversity (May, 1994).

Poststructural Feminist Understandings of Discourse

Even with a focus on individuals and their unique experiences, poststructural feminism does not ignore the influence of social structures. As previously mentioned, discourse is understood as the way that written and oral language as well as unwritten and unspoken texts interact in order to shape social structures and control behaviours within a society (Allan, et al., 2010b; St. Pierre, 2000). In this way, discourse shapes reality by “giving meaning to the world” (Weedon, 1997, p. 23). Discourse shapes individuals and groups by defining what is acceptable and unacceptable (St. Pierre, 2000), and competing discourses offer different ways of understanding and interacting with the world (Weedon, 1997). Discourse provides structures to discipline and self-discipline individuals so they conform to the dominant discourse’s ways of thinking and acting (Strega, 2005).

For example, in online learning contexts women’s expectations and experiences are shaped by discourses that define adult learning, post-secondary education, women’s roles at work and in their families, women’s technology skills and the relationships between professors and students. These discourses about women’s roles also shape how, when and why they learn (Hayes, 2000a). When women choose online classes they are often doing so because they accept the discourse that online learning is a flexible and accessible way for them to

balance work, family and school responsibilities (Kelland, 2005a). As they try to fit all of these activities into their lives, they also negotiate discourses about what it means to be a good mother, spouse, employee, and student. These are often competing discourses, which can lead women to feel that they are part of numerous “greedy institutions” competing for their time, energy and attention (Rosalind Edwards, 1993, p. 63). Yet these women try to meet all of the expectations associated with the numerous roles they occupy.

Institutional policies are an expression of the dominant discourses within an institution. Policies both reflect dominant discourses and support the continued dominance of specific discourses. For example, online learners may perceive that institutional policies are written to address the needs and concerns of traditional, on-campus students (i.e. young, single, full-time students) rather than those of online learners who may live in different communities, work full-time and raise a family while completing courses at a distance. Policies that require online learners to pay fees for services they cannot access without visiting the campus (Varvel, et al., 2007) or require students to attend face-to-face orientations or summer residency sessions (Beaudoin & Hylton, 2004; Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins, & Shoemaker, 2000; Hodgkinson, 2002) support discourses about learning requiring face-to-face meetings and about post-secondary education being intended to train young people who have no other outside commitments. These policies fail to recognize the diversity of online learners, and their lack of physical presences helps to maintain their invisibility to policy makers.

Poststructural Feminist Understandings of Women as Learners

My research focuses on a poststructural feminist analysis of women's experience learning online. While my research does not attempt to examine the pedagogical approaches experienced by the women, my research is informed by poststructural feminists understandings of women and education.

Women's learning experiences are gendered, as are men's. In other words, experience is shaped by gender, which is socially constructed or negotiated as individuals interact with each other and social structures: "We view gender as a type of social relation that is constantly changing, created and recreated in daily interactions as well as on a broader scale through such institutions as school, work, and the family" (Flannery & Hayes, 2000, p. 4). Gender experiences are also influenced by subjectivities unique to each individual based on race, age, ability, sexual orientation, etc., and these interactions are always influenced by power. Therefore, a woman can have different learning experiences in different contexts; for example, she may have different experiences as a learner, as a parent talking to her child's teacher, as a student herself, and as a leader within her ethnocultural community.

Learning environments are not neutral. Power relationships influence learners, their interactions, the effectiveness of the learning experience and what kinds of learning are most valued (Hayes, 2000a). Discourses of learning and what counts as knowledge shape and are defined by content, curriculum, materials, space and policies (Pillow, 2000). Power relationships are also evident in the surveillance of learners in online and face-to-face settings (Boshier &

Wilson, 1998; Brookfield, 2001). Similarly, women are not just passive receptors of learning. They are “active agents who are both challenging and conforming to social structures and institutions” (Hayes & Flannery, 2000, p. xiii) who shape the learning environment and their own experiences. They learn in the many contexts in which they live and they apply what they learn in those same contexts (Hayes & Flannery, 2000).

Formal education, including post-secondary education and adult education, are shaped by discourse. The goals and methods of educators are shaped by their educational philosophies and discourses of power and knowledge, which then shape the individual learners’ experiences. In the case of online learning, constructivist theory is one of the dominant discourses (Kelland, 2006a). Poststructural feminist educators actively examine the assumptions that shape their teaching. They recognize that power, particularly disciplinary power, is present in many educational settings but that both students and educators can resist by looking at their assumptions about truth and knowledge (Brookfield, 2001; English, 2005; Tisdell, 2000).

The Poststructural Feminist Researcher

While the specific details of how I position my research within a poststructural feminist framework are detailed in the following chapters, I want to briefly describe the role of the poststructural feminist researcher here.

Poststructural feminist research does not seek “Truth” from a modernist perspective. No discourse, including science, can provide access to the truth (Weedon, 1997). Poststructural feminism recognizes the value of diversity and

difference in perspectives. It also questions the researcher's authority to determine what is true, instead claiming that different searches for truth will give different knowledge depending on the questions asked and the tools used. The poststructural feminist researcher's goals are to provide different perspectives, to give research participants' an opportunity to share their voices, and to allow readers to develop their own understandings. The researcher "can choose between different accounts of reality on the basis of their social implications" (Weedon, 1997, p. 28). As a poststructural feminist, I acknowledge my own position and how it impacts my research and writing (Lather, 2000; Luke & Gore, 1992a). My research will examine my own position as a researcher and my experiences as an online learner (see my narrative following Chapter 8), which have significantly influenced my interest in this topic and my own understandings of it. Likewise, the researcher and reader also have their own unique subjectivities, which they bring to reading and writing of the research text. Their previous experiences with a topic, a theoretical approach and their positionality as a reader and researcher all shape how they read and understand what I write. In this way a text is never static, and it changes and is changed by the reader, and ideally it "open[s] up present frames of knowing to the possibility of thinking differently" (Lather, 2000, p. 288).

Poststructural feminists offer deconstruction as a way of challenging power relationships and assumptions held in discourses (Collins, 2000). As St. Pierre (2000) explains, deconstruction is "about looking at how a structure has been constructed, what holds it together, and what it produces" (p. 482). It

involves examining the language and discourse that shape realities and identities (Flannery & Hayes, 2000; Strega, 2005). Poststructural feminists use different techniques to deconstruct the “texts” of social discourse. These techniques include challenging binaries by “identifying the binaries or oppositions,” “reversing or displacing the dependent term from its negative position” and “creating a more fluid and less coercive conceptual organization of terms” (Collins, 2000, pp. 54-55). By deconstructing binaries, the messiness and contradictions that are hidden within the simplicity of the binary can be observed. For example, Kazmer (2005a) shows how home and school are not clearly defined spaces for online learners. Instead they occupy a “hybrid space” that blurs the boundaries and allows learners in different physical locations to learn together.

One outcome of deconstruction is decentering, or “unseating those who occupy centers of power as well as the knowledge that defends their power” (Collins, 2000, p. 43). Through deconstruction, new discourses can be written by identifying the absences, the contradictions, and the undefined spaces (St. Pierre, 2000). With this ability to deconstruct and reconstruct, we acknowledge a degree of responsibility for the discourses we create: “we are ethically bound to pay attention to how we word the world” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 484).

Concluding Perspectives

By drawing on elements of poststructural feminism, I have developed a theoretical framework for my research. It focuses on gender issues and the recognition of unique experiences of individual learners, which are shaped in the

intersections of their own subjectivities. My research reflects these understandings; I recognize and represent women as learners negotiating multiple subjectivities as they mediate the competing roles of partners/spouses, mother/grandmother, student, employee, volunteer and community member. Their perceived power and their ability to mediate power changes with the context of their living, working and learning environments to create complex interactions and tensions. It is the complexity, the mediation of competing roles, and response to tensions that I want to examine and share. In the next chapter, I will look more closely at the methods I use to examine the participants' experiences and the roles I play within the research process.

MOMS WITH YOUNG CHILDREN: REBECCA AND JESSICA

Rebecca

Program: B.Ed. after degree, which included some online courses – in progress during focus group

Personal situation: Age 34, married, two pre-school children

Employment: Full-time student

Previous/Concurrent Online Experience: Also completed online courses as part of a Human Resources Certificate

“After having children...”

I am a full-time student completing a B.Ed. after-degree and a full time mom of 2 little ones. I just completed an online technology course for my program and I completed a Human Resources certificate that included a number of online courses.

The first competing tensions that come to mind I experienced in my last online course. They were finding the motivation and desire to do the work and needing to meet or exceed the standards I set for myself, which requires a lot of work and commitment. This was the first course I took after having children and I too experienced the aforementioned constraints of family time and chores. It was a real issue of time management for me. I had a limited amount of time to complete the course. For the first time I had to break the tasks down and schedule work and study time instead of my time revolving around my studies. I set arbitrary deadlines for myself and had to push to get it done. There were a million

things I would have rather been doing. I eventually used my desire to exceed my own expectations to create the motivation I needed to do the work.

Online learning puts the responsibility for learning squarely on the shoulders of the learner, or at least there is an illusion of sole responsibility. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but rather something we are not accustomed to in our society. In a traditional classroom we have a number of hours every week to talk through our questions, assumptions and learning roadblocks but in an online environment you have to identify the issues on your own in order to communicate them to the instructor/TA etc. In an online environment, I rarely take advantage of the expertise of my instructor. I tend to work through on my own and research answers to my tough questions online rather than waiting for a response. Self directed learning is a valuable skill but I miss the energy and creativity generated in face to face conversation.

“Poorly translated versions of a face-to-face course ‘published’ on line”

I have taken a number of online courses and I have participated in courses that required weekly participation in discussions and group projects, courses that were “published” online but had no interaction with anyone apart from the course facilitator who responded to emails and marked assignments, and courses that fell somewhere in the middle. I found that I was the most engaged in the ones that included some sort of peer interaction. The requirement of weekly participation kept me on schedule and I enjoyed engaging with my peers in discussions and on projects. In terms of learning, I have retained more of the information from the

interactive classes. I also got the most out of the courses that had continuous interaction and feedback from the instructor. Developing a relationship with the instructor increased my engagement in the course. Unfortunately the majority of the courses I have completed did not include peer interaction. Many of them seemed to be poorly translated versions of a face-to-face course “published” on line.

Another frustration is a poorly designed course website. I recently completed a course through an online university and after 4 months of working on a self-directed online course I was still thoroughly confused by the course website and found it difficult to navigate. The instructions for projects were not linked to the projects and the course site required a separate login from the online university site. It was frustrating all round.

“Having a laptop has changed the way I approach online learning.”

When I was tied to a desktop computer, my online learning looked a lot more like work. I sat at my desk, focused only on what I was doing. Now I rarely use my computer at a desk, I am currently curled up on the couch, watching Olympic figure skating and catching up on posting. I find that I treat my online learning more casually, which probably contributes to feeling of not being on top of the courses, so when it is time to get down to work (according to the arbitrary self-imposed schedule) I take my laptop and set myself up away from distractions at my desk and get down to work.

Jessica

Program: Masters degree online – has been working on this degree for 4 years (including 2 maternity leaves) at the time of the focus group

Personal situation: Age 30, married, three children

Employment: Works at home as TA and is a dayhome provider

Previous/Concurrent Online Experience: none

“I’d like to cuddle and watch a movie with my husband tonight”

For me, the tensions really center around the limits of time and energy. Given that I have committed myself in so many ways and there are limited hours in the day, I try to cram in as much as I can. This leaves me feeling sometimes depleted and sometimes fulfilled.

Things have a domino effect. When it’s going well, I’m on top of the world, like I can take on anything. When it’s going poorly, I feel like a failure at everything that matters to me. Perspective is everything... I have to remind myself that this really is a lot – I don’t have to be a superhero, gracefully managing every aspect of my life with poise. When I hold myself up to this standard, I invariably fall short.

Specific examples: when I have TA duties to tend to, coursework to complete, practicum work/reading to get to, the kids’ lunches to make, housecleaning to get to, things like down time with my husband and me-time get pushed to the side. For example, I’d like to cuddle and watch a movie with my

husband tonight, but the reality is that I have work to do. Letting one ball drop will likely create an avalanche that I'm just not keen on.

While I know that caring for myself and my marriage are essential for the whole thing to work properly, these aspects of my life seem frivolous when compared to a pressing deadline or a pile of dirty clothes. Perhaps the flexible online learning is one way that some women experience the North American push for more.

“The online aspect of learning that really works for me is the independent nature”

For me, a good connection with the instructor was really important as I was finding my feet in the program. Now that I'm nearing the end of my degree, although I still value my instructor's role, I feel less dependent on the quality of the relationship. I feel independent enough to take his/her good aspects and leave the rest.

My program has posting requirements (2-3 initial responses to discussion forum questions, then at least 2 responses to peers; posts are to be 100-200 words long, 7-9 posts total are requested for each week). The program likens the time in the discussion forum to in-class time, but I would say that I don't learn quite as much in these settings as I do just doing the readings and following the steps. I guess for me, the posting is more of a mandatory drag that I do out of necessity.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The following chapter explores my research methodology and how it relates to my theoretical framework. This doctoral research project consisted of two distinct phases: an interview using photo-elicitation techniques and an online focus group. In the first phase, participants were invited to participate in individual interviews, which examined their experiences through a discussion of photographs they had taken that represented their experiences as online learners. In the second phase, a different group of participants collaborated in an online focus group to share their experiences of learning in online settings. By using multiple methods of gathering data, I was able to include a more diverse group of participants and to explore different perspectives on their experiences learning online.

This chapter is divided into four sections: the first section examines my research project and the participants, the second describes the interviews I conducted, the third describes the focus group and the last section examines considerations of combining multiple methods and issues that relate to both phases of the research.

Participants

Participants were identified through my existing network of contacts, through referrals from participants and from email inquiries from women who saw my research project on my university web site

(<http://www.ualberta.ca/~blakey>) and on my CIDER (Canadian Institute of

Distance Education Research) profile (<http://cider.athabascau.ca/Members/jenna>). I spoke with 16 women who were interested in participating in my research and who had each completed at least two courses online. I provided them each with a copy of my information letter and consent form (Appendix A). In the end, 13 participated in either the interviews or the focus group. However, one participant did not return her consent form so I was unable to include her comments in my analysis.

I attempted to use purposeful sampling (Glesne, 1999, p. 292) to ensure I included a diverse group of learners with different educational experiences. In this exploration I engaged six women in the photo-elicitation interviews and a further six in the online focus group. Interviews were conducted with women who lived within driving distance. I chose not to conduct telephone interviews with women living further away. Instead, I invited them to participate in the online focus group component, which increased the diversity of participants. While the individual interviews gave me an opportunity to look in detail at the experiences of each woman, the focus group allowed me to see what the group of women found to be important while providing me the opportunity to share some of the emergent themes from the interviews.

Participants' Demographics

The women who completed the interviews were not as diverse as I anticipated (see Table 1 and individual narratives for demographic information). Only one interview participant had children living at home, and her children were in their teens. There were no participants with young children. There were also no

interview participants who were not of Caucasian or European descent, none with disabilities, and none who identified themselves as being lesbian. All the participants were between 25 and 65 years old with half of them being 52 years old. All of the participants lived in and around Edmonton and Red Deer, which facilitated face-to-face interviewing.

Table 1
Demographic Details of the Women who were Interviewed and Participated in the Online Focus Group

Name ^a	Age ^b	Field of study (Level of study) ^c	FT/PT ^d	Marital and Family Status	Employment Status	Location (Urban/Rural, Province) ^e
<i>Interview Participants</i>						
Amy	25	Speech pathology assistant (diploma)	PT	Engaged, no children	Pre-school teacher's assistant	Urban, AB
Nicole	34	Writing (graduate)	PT	Married, no children	Yoga instructor and writer	Urban, AB
Sharon	52	Higher education (graduate)	PT	Married, 3 children (13-21 at start of degree)	Associate VP of college	Rural, AB
Cynthia	52	Nursing (undergraduate), education (graduate)	FT	Divorced, 2 grown children, 2 grandchildren	Online instructor at two universities	Urban, AB
Debra	52	Applied communications (undergraduate)	FT*	Married, 2 grown children	Public affairs	Urban, AB
Linda	65	Writing (non-credit)	PT	Married, 3 grown children, 10 grandchildren, 3 great-grandchildren	Retired	Urban, AB
<i>Focus Group Participants</i>						
Jessica	30	Counselling Psychology (graduate)	FT	Married, 3 young children (under age 5)	Works from home, TA	Urban, AB
Michelle	34	Distance education (graduate)	FT	Single, no children	Teaching, translation, dance, play director, arts festival organizer	Urban, ON
Rebecca	34	Human resource management (certificate), education (undergraduate)	FT	Married, 2 young children (under age 3)	Full-time student	Urban, AB
Tracy	39	Educational technology (graduate)	PT*	Married, no children	Instructional designer, works at home	Urban, AB

Karen	50	Distance education (graduate)	FT*	Married, 3 grown children, 1 grandchild	Consultant	Rural, BC
Barbara	56	Distance education (post-graduate certificate), horticultural therapy (certificate)	PT*	Married, 4 grown children, 1 grandchild	Learning coach at college, and self-employed	Urban, ON

^a These are the pseudonyms for the women who participated in this research project.

^b Age at the time of the interview

^c non-credit = participants receive certificate for completion but no marks or academic credit, certificate = 1 year program, Diploma = 2 year program, undergraduate = bachelor's degree or equivalent, post-graduate certificate = 1 or 2 years after undergraduate degree, graduate = master's degree or PhD or equivalent

^d Some may be fulltime students but they are not necessarily completing all of their courses online.

^e Based on definitions provided by participants. When they did not provide a clear definition, I relied on population statistics to determine a category (over 10,000 is urban).

* These women are not currently studying, so this indicates whether they were fulltime or part-time students when they were studying online. In all cases, these women have recently graduated from their programs.

One of my reasons for including a focus group component was to include a wider range of experiences and participants from more diverse backgrounds. Details about the participants were gathered using a demographic form (Appendix C), which is described in more detail later in this chapter. The focus group participants did provide additional diversity geographically (Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario) and they had experience in different institutions and programs. The focus group participants included women between 30 and 56 years of age. Three of the women had children living at home including two with young children under age five. Again no one self-identified as being from an ethnic group other than Caucasian or European decent, but one participant did self-identify as being French-Canadian (Michelle). Additionally, the focus group included one woman who identified herself as having a visual disability (Barbara) and another who stated she had a learning disability (Michelle). I acknowledge that the participants were still a fairly homogenous group. In retrospect, I could

have actively sought participants from more diverse backgrounds rather than relying on my existing networks, which resulted in participants from backgrounds similar to my own.

All participants had completed at least two courses online. This minimum level of involvement was a pre-requisite for participation in the study. Other than sharing that pre-requisite, participants' educational background varied considerably. Their experience with online learning ranged from a participant who had completed two non-credit courses online to a woman who completed her entire bachelor's degree in a program that included online courses and on-campus summer institutes to a woman working on her dissertation after completing the coursework for her doctoral studies through an online program.

Most of the women were enrolled in Canadian institutions, but one participant (Cynthia) had completed the first year of her PhD program at a U.S. institution, but was applying to Canadian institutions to complete her program. The level of the courses the women had completed online included non-credit courses, diploma programs, bachelor degrees, post-graduate diplomas, master's degrees and doctoral degrees. Their fields of study varied as well. Some participants were current students and others were recent graduates in the following fields: education including distance education, educational technology and higher education; writing; health care including speech pathology, nursing, and horticultural therapy; applied communications; and counselling psychology.

Many participants had previous experience with distance education, including having taken courses through distance learning formats other than

online learning at the k-12 and post-secondary levels, and previous experience with online learning and experience teaching through distance education and online learning. At least one had a spouse who completed an online program before she began taking courses online (Linda). The number of participants with previous experience with online learning may be related to the way I recruited participants. A number of participants responded to my posting on the CIDER website. Many of these inquiries were from other women interested in research about online learning, in some cases because they were studying online and researching online learning themselves.

All participants reported in their demographics form that they felt comfortable using a computer (responses included: “fine,” “very comfortable,” and “extremely”). However, one participant requested that I print the forms she needed to complete (consent form and demographics form) because she did not know how to use her printer (Linda). I assumed that participants in the online focus group had previous experience with computer-mediated communication including email and web-based communication forums, which they probably acquired while learning online. I also assumed they would have reliable access to the Internet for the duration of the focus group. While not explicitly stated in the requirements for participants, this assumed requirement did not seem to pose a problem for any of the participants including one participant who participated using dial-up Internet access. I provided all the focus group participants with instructions for joining the online focus group (Appendix B), and while I was

prepared to answer questions, there was only one who had problems accessing the site (Michelle).

Phase 1: Photo-Elicitation Interviewing

The first phase of this research involved conducting photo-elicitation interviews with six women. Photography can be used in qualitative research for three main purposes: building rapport, gathering data, and presenting results (Hammond, 2004). I used photography primarily as a tool for gathering data; however, it also assisted in building rapport and, through the inclusion of selected photographs in this dissertation, presenting results. I used what Taylor (2002) describes as “auto-photography” whereby “the participant, rather than the researcher, is given control of the camera and is responsible for taking photographs” (Introduction Section, para. 8). Hurworth (2003) would describe this type of photo-elicitation interviewing as reflexive photography. In the following sections, I will examine the theoretical and practical aspects of conducting photo-elicitation interviews. First, I will examine the theoretical side of photo-elicitation interviews, namely, why I chose this methodology, the challenges it presented and how it relates to my theoretical framework. Second, I will look at my interview procedures including how I actually undertook my research and conducted photo-elicitation interviews and the ethical issues I faced.

Photography as a Research Method

Participants in photo-elicitation interviews take photos that include many types of content. Harper (2002) offers a continuum of types of photographic

content from visual inventories, which range from photos of people, places and things, to photos representing collective or institutionalized memory, which include events or experiences of social significance, to photos showing intimate dimensions of the social, which include photos of the self, one's body and one's own social relationships. Additions to this list may be photographs that represent metaphors and photographs of an abstract nature intended to illustrate emotions.

Rationale for using photo-elicitation interviews.

Many advantages arise from using photography in qualitative research. First, it allows the researcher to gather, and the participant to share, both visual and verbal content. Sharing images can empower participants by allowing them to shape the interview process, by legitimizing their experiences through recording them on film and by giving participants voice through their photographs (Hurworth, 2003; Taylor, 2002). Second, photography is one way to build trust and rapport (Harper, 2002). Third, photography provides a structure for the interview and a starting point for asking questions. Using images in the interview can elicit memories and stories, prompt emotional responses, make visible that which is taken for granted, and access both conscious and subconscious understandings. Reflexive photography is known for “[promoting] deeper levels of thinking than interviews alone” (Hurworth, 2003). Photography can also “metaphorically bridge into the unconscious, into places where words do not (and cannot) go” (Weiser, 2001, Introduction section, para. 7).

In this project, photo-elicitation interviews were used to facilitate participants' reflections on their own ways of learning. This method was intended

to gather information that cannot be shared easily in responses to direct questions about how participants see themselves as learners. Auto-photography, as one approach to photography, also has additional advantages. First, it engages participants in the research process because participants' photos represent what is meaningful to them rather than what appeals to or catches the attention of the researcher. It also engages participants by allowing them to share their stories or narratives as they share their photographs (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004; Taylor, 2002). Second, having a visual component to the interview can facilitate meaning-making by allowing participants to reflect images and their significance. In this way photography provides access to visual metaphors (Taylor, 2002). It can also help the researcher and the participant reflect on a common setting by providing a "mutual visual context" (Taylor, 2002, Research Implications section, para. 1).

Challenges of using photography.

Using photography in qualitative research presents some challenges. First, images are representations of reality that are subject to interpretation (Taylor, 2002). The photographer, the researcher, and each reader/viewer could all have different interpretations of any visual image. Therefore, it is necessary for the researcher to allow the photographers to share as much as possible about their understanding of the images so that the reader and researcher can understand the photographer's perspective. With information about the photographer's interpretation and the researcher's analysis, the reader can then make an informed interpretation of the image. I addressed this challenge by using the photographs as the prompts for the interviews. This approach allowed participants to identify

important aspects of the photos and to share them during the interview process. I did not attempt to interpret the significance of the photograph myself as part of the analysis process. I relied on the women's descriptions of the photos and the stories they told about the photos in my analysis. Where possible, I have included copies of the photographs for readers so they can view each interview participant's photographs while reading the accompanying stories. Readers can form their own interpretations of the photographs as they read the stories the women shared. I will later discuss the challenges I faced in getting copies of the photographs.

A second challenge of using photography in qualitative research is that photographs are both taken and viewed within social contexts (Banks, 1995; Taylor, 2002). Understanding the context in which a photo was taken is important in understanding its content. The context must be described and provided with the photographs so all subsequent viewers are aware of the context; however, the viewers' contexts will also shape their understanding of the photograph. To address this challenge, I asked the women about their experiences taking pictures to find out how they approached the photographs and how they reacted to the experience. Again, I relied on the stories the women shared in response to the photographs in my analysis because then I did not need to interpret the photographs or their meanings.

A third challenge of using photography in qualitative research is that photographs can reflect power relationships (Banks, 1995). The person who decides to take the picture, frame the content, and share the photograph has a

voice while anyone within the photograph and those outside of the boundaries of the photograph remain silent. In response to this challenge, I acknowledged that when they took photographs or chose to use photographs they already had taken, the individual women were the ones who made all of the decisions about what was included in and excluded from the photographs. While I did not explicitly ask the participants about how they framed their photographs, I did ask them if there were photographs they were unable to take or that they would have wanted to include but could not. In this way, I acknowledged that not all the photographs they wanted to include were necessarily part of the interview.

A fourth challenge of using photography in qualitative research is that the photographer is faced with the challenge of trying to capture the invisible and intangible elements of a situation with a photo. Separate from any description of the context and meaning of the photo, the viewer may be unaware of details that are significant to the image (Taylor, 2002). To address this concern, when I include photographs in my writing, I also include the stories that the women shared. These stories describe the context and significance of the photographs, from the participant's perspective, while also providing details that can inform the reader's interpretation of the photographs and stories.

Challenges of auto-photography.

Other challenges are inherent in the use of auto-photography. Taylor (2002) explains that participants can be uncertain of their skills as photographers and/or self-conscious about their photographs. Due to this self-consciousness, their lack of familiarity with conceptualizing ideas in a visual environment or

technical limitations from the equipment or their abilities, participants may find it challenging to capture the images they feel represent their responses to the interviewer's prompts. The potential to address some of these concerns exists if the participants are able to view their images immediately to see if the images are appropriate (i.e. using instantly developing cameras like Polaroid cameras or digital cameras) or if the participants are able to modify their images (i.e. using digital photography and photo editing software). However, allowing participants to edit their photos would require not only that they have specific technical skills, but it would require another layer of analysis within the research process in order to understand how and why each image was modified. In this research project, each participant provided her own digital camera to take photographs. I did not provide any technical support or advice on the process of taking photographs. My only input was to request that any photographs they emailed to me were in the largest file size possible so they would be of the best quality possible for duplicating. As far as I know, the photos used in this research were not edited prior to our interviews; however, some photos were edited prior to being published to remove identifying details.

Taylor also identifies time as a challenge with interviews based on auto-photography. The process requires considerably more time than a regular interview since the interviewer must distribute the cameras, allow the participants time to take photographs, and collect cameras and process film prior to conducting the interviews. The length of time required for the photography component can vary. Clark-Ibáñez (2004) suggests that participants take a week

to complete their photographs; however, some participants may require more time. Using digital photography allowed me to schedule interviews more quickly than if I had needed to arrange to develop the film for each participant. In this research project, participants were not given a particular timeline for taking photographs. In most cases, we arranged an interview time at the participant's convenience with the understanding she would take photographs before we met.

Analysis of photo-elicitation interviews also includes challenging elements. Clark-Ibáñez (2004) identifies challenges in coding both visual and verbal data. I relied primarily on participants' verbal descriptions of their photos in my analysis, thus reducing the need to code the visual images.

Clark-Ibáñez (2004) also identifies technical difficulties with equipment and the cost of providing participants with equipment as additional challenges. She also says that the researcher may find it harder to get ethics approval for this type of research because it raises questions of privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality beyond those associated with traditional interviews. For example, researchers need to be attentive to details that reveal identities of participants, as well as protecting the privacy of non-participants who may be photographed by participants. I discuss these issues in more detail later in this chapter.

Relating this method to my theoretical framework.

The use of photo-elicitation interviews is consistent with my theoretical framework. This method acknowledges participants' experiences and their diverse ways of understanding the world by drawing on both visual and oral narratives. It also recognizes that knowledge is shaped by social forces and participants'

interactions within social contexts, while allowing participants to reflect on social influences.

First, using a combination of photography and interviewing is consistent with poststructural feminist research methodologies because it challenges traditional research methods by allowing participants to share their experiences using visual and oral narratives (Lather, 2000). Combining photography and interviewing can be seen as a type of narrative research because a collection of photographs tell a story about how the collector sees a situation or event or about how the collector wants that situation or event to be perceived because the photographs selected match the story the collector is telling (Weiser, 2001). These visual narratives are supplemented by conversations shaped by participants' photographs, which give participants the opportunity to select topics to be discussed and stories to be shared.

As an interviewer, I am aware of the challenges of interviewing in what Fontana and Frey (2000) describe as "a paternalistic social system in which masculine identities are differentiated from feminine ones" (p. 658). So, I have been attentive to not positioning myself as an expert who has the answers, an outsider who is gathering information for my own purposes, or a disembodied observer who is just collecting content for analysis. Instead, I positioned myself as insider who had some experience learning online, though I acknowledged we each had our own different experiences. During the interviews, I shared my own experiences as an online learner, a student balancing many competing responsibilities, a busy mom and a researcher. I answered questions about my

experiences learning online and my research and I shared my own experiences and feelings in order to create a dialogue, and not only because I wanted to develop a trusting relationship with the participants (Fontana & Frey, 2000). Sharing my own experiences as an online learner also helped to position me as an insider who may have experience similar to those of the participants. Through discussion with participants, I helped one identify institutions where she could apply for further study, and I offered suggestions to another who had questions about completing a doctoral degree online.

In order to challenge the traditional interview methods from a feminist perspective, I used interview techniques that acknowledge participants as equals with valuable information and experiences to share. Since participants decided which images to capture with their cameras, they controlled the content and direction of the interview (Frohmann, 2005).

Photo-elicitation interviews can challenge power relationships and traditional research methods. Having access to the equipment and the authority to take photographs can create unequal power relationships between photographer and subject. For example, when an outsider comes into a community to photograph and record details of the community for research, the members of the community become subjects of the research. The photographer has access to the equipment and skills to take photographs. The photographer also has the power to decide what or who is worth photographing, how a scene is framed, what is not photographed and how the photographs are subsequently shared (Frohmann, 2005). However, allowing research participants to take photographs and share

their meanings orally and in writing disrupts the traditional researcher-researched relationship, and can challenge these power relationships (Frohmann, 2005; Harper, 2000). Photo-elicitation interviews allow participants the opportunity to document their experiences based on their own values. This approach gives participants voices to decide what to photograph and how to frame scenes. Participants create a tangible image to confirm their experiences, and they have the opportunity to use this image to share their experiences with each other and the researcher. The photo-elicitation interview experience recognizes that participants are the experts on their experiences. However, as researcher, I still maintained a certain measure of power because I shaped the research project, analyzed the data and presented the findings.

Visual images offer another way of understanding the world challenging the commonly-held view that written texts provide the objective truth (Holliday, 2000). Yet, the value and authority of visual images has changed over time. Visual images were associated with “the authority of science” before video technology was easily accessible to household users (Harper, 2000, p. 719). But, more recently the perceived objectivity of visual images has decreased with the popularity and accessibility of tools for digitally editing photographs (Harper, 2000). “Photographs saturate popular culture and are generally treated superficially” so they are often disregarded in research (Harper, 2005, p. 749). Nonetheless, using photographs challenges assumptions about what qualifies as knowledge and how it can be sought and shared. Texts can be juxtaposed with photos to show they both offer valuable insights.

Interview Procedures

I loved the picture format...the process allowed me to feel creative and express my sense of life long learning in a personal and meaningful way!

(Cynthia)

I conducted face-to-face interviews with six participants. The interviews were scheduled at times and locations that were convenient for the participants. They took place in my home, participants' homes (and gardens), and my university office; on weekdays and weekends; and in the morning, afternoon and evenings. I conducted one follow-up interview by phone at the interviewee's request.

Before the interview.

Prior to the interviews and following the interviews, I communicated with the participants over a period of time to explain my research, to answer their questions, to get their consent to participate, to gather demographic information using a survey, to explain the interview process, to provide guidance about taking photographs, to schedule a face-to-face interview, to arrange for them to review their interview transcripts, and to keep them up to date on how I was progressing with my research project. Most of these interactions occurred through email, though in some cases we spoke by phone or met in person.

Before each interview and before the focus group, I used a demographics form to gather demographic and background information about each participant. This survey included both open and closed-ended questions. When we met for the interviews, I asked participants some specific questions to confirm details from

their forms. These questions helped me to understand the contexts in which participants were living and studying.

Each participant agreed to take photographs using her own digital camera. While I was prepared to provide disposable cameras for participants, this proved not to be necessary. I provided instructions (Appendix D) to the participants that they were to reflect on situations where they felt pulled in different directions while learning online, and then they were to take photographs that illustrated their experiences. Based on the experiences of other researchers, I kept my instructions to participants very general to allow participants to develop their own understandings (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004; Taylor, 2002).

Though I originally intended to ask participants not to take photographs of themselves or other people in order to protect their privacy and the privacy of people around them, I revised my study to provide the participants with more options in their picture taking. I did request that they complete a release form (Appendix E) allowing me permission to use their photographs and identifying which photographs may need to be edited to protect their privacy. They were also required to have anyone they photographed complete a separate consent form allowing me to use or edit their image (Appendix F). Most participants did not take any photos of other people, so they did not need to complete this additional form. Those who did take photos of other people did not return the required forms, and I was unable to use those photos in my research because I did not have the necessary consent. Fortunately, my research analysis focused on the analysis of the stories shared by the women, so I was still able to use the descriptions of

the photographs as data in my research. In my analysis and in my presentation of the results, I was able to use all of the photographs taken by three of the women; some of the photos taken by one of the women, though most could not be used because she did not provide the required consent forms; and none of the photographs taken by the other two women because they did not send me copies of their photographs.

In my original proposal, I suggested I would meet with each participant twice, once to complete the demographic form and to go over the guidelines for taking pictures, and a second time to conduct the actual interview, but a second meeting was unnecessary because it worked better for participants to conduct preliminary paperwork by email and to pose and answer any questions by email or phone. Therefore, I met with each participant only once in person, after the photos were ready.

The interview.

One, 60 to 90 minute in-person interview was conducted to review photographs taken by each participant. I audio-recorded all the interviews. We used the photographs taken by each participant to structure our conversation and to stimulate responses during the interview. They served as “starting-points, rather than finished end-products [...] [to] explore feelings, attitudes and beliefs and stimulate additional creative expression” (Weiser, 2001, PhotoTherapy section, para. 11).

In order to allow participants to shape the interview, I did not prepare a set of common questions for the interviews. Instead, I began most of the interviews

by describing my research question. I then asked a few questions, if necessary, to clarify details from the demographics form (Appendix G). In one case, with Cynthia, I forgot this step and I found it was much harder to get the participant to talk about the tensions in her experiences learning online, and that interview covered a much wider range of topics than the other interviews.

After we had established the context, I asked each participant to tell me how she approached taking photographs and what that was like for her. This helped me to understand the photographic content, the context in which the photographs were taken, and the meaning or significance of the images (Taylor, 2002). It also helped to build rapport because it encouraged participants to talk about how they approached the project. Here are some of their responses:

I kind of thought “OK what were the main things when I was doing these courses? What did I need to get through?” (Amy)

*So I just thought about times where either, I was working online on school and there were things in my life that were encroaching and destabilizing it and getting in the way and distracting, as well as things that I had to take care of my life which were preventing me from getting online and doing my school work.... I probably could take thousands of photographs, I try to just narrow it down to the most essential moments where I felt torn.
(Nicole)*

I'm a little bit not sure exactly what you wanted so ... I did things that interrupted my studies ... so what I thought about was, "well, I guess I'll just do all the things that interrupt me." You know, in terms of my course. I want to go write and I want to go do my course 'cause I have an assignment but all these things get in my way. (Linda)

Well, I mostly went around the house and tried to do what you asked me to do which was "tell me about some things, or take some pictures of things that this course or the online setting might have represented for you." (Debra)

So I'm looking... my grandchildren are very, very important to me. Learning is a lifelong process, and we build our learning from others and being in the presence of other folks, ... these, the pictures, these just made sense (Cynthia)

Each participant used her own approach to taking photos. Some participants set aside a set time (i.e. one evening) and took a series of photos. Other participants took photos over a number of days. One participant only used photos she had already taken in other contexts (Sharon), but that she felt were relevant, and one used a few photos that she had from previous contexts (ultrasound photos of her grandchild) plus some new photos taken for the research (Cynthia). Some participants took all the photos themselves, but one participant had her partner take some photos as well (Amy). Some participants took photos of

themselves or other people, while others used images to represent people around them. Some provided their photos in advance so I could print them on photo paper, another provided them in a Word document, and some came with their cameras or computers and then sent me copies of the photos afterwards.

Participants provided between seven and eighteen photos. In retrospect, I should have had a more structured system for gathering the photographs because some of the participants did not follow through in sending the photographs to me after the interview.

The next step in the interview was to look at and discuss the photographs. I framed my questions in general terms, such as “tell me about your photos” in order to avoid influencing participants’ responses (Collier, 2001). Each participant ultimately shaped the conversation as she communicated what was significant to her (Hurworth, 2003; Taylor, 2002). Each participant was encouraged to follow her own line of thinking in response to questions, so her photographs shaped the content and direction of the interview and the responses she provided. Essentially, the photographs served as visual prompts to facilitate the participants’ reflections on their experiences as online learners while I asked questions to probe for more details, to clarify statements, prompt further reflection, and explore ideas in more depth.

Throughout the interview, the photographs helped to establish rapport by giving us something to look at and discuss together. During the interview, I shared some of my own experiences and answered some questions from participants. This sharing also helped to establish rapport and made the interview

more of a conversation. In many cases we discovered common interests or similar experiences, both academic and personal. In this way, each interview was a “negotiated text” shaped by both my perspectives and those of the participants, as we shared experiences of being students – in many cases graduate students - and online learners.

While I had not prepared any common questions, and I did not intend to use a standard set of questions, I found that there were some recurring questions that arose in the interviews. After numerous participants raised similar issues in our discussions, I decided I wanted to explore them further. They included questions about who made technology-related decisions and how those decisions were made, and what pulls (motivations) encouraged them to pursue online learning when it seemed to present many challenges. If I did not ask these questions in the interview, I made sure to include them in the transcript as follow-up questions.

Near the end of the interview, I asked each participant if there were any photographs she had wanted to take but was unable to take. Participants described photographs they had planned to take and forgot to include, photographs they wanted to take but could not stage, and photographs they thought of during the interview.

After the interview.

At the end of each interview, I explained the next step to the participant: sending the interview for transcription. I asked each participant if she would be willing to review her transcript and respond to any additional questions I

identified while reading the transcript. After each recorded interview was transcribed, I sent it to participants for review. For each interview, I asked some clarification questions. One participant chose to discuss her comments by telephone (Amy); I recorded and transcribed this follow-up discussion. Most of the participants responded to my questions in writing by inserting their responses within the text of the transcribed interview or by using the “track changes” feature on their word processors. Two participants did not respond to my follow-up questions and did not respond after numerous attempts to contact them following the initial interview (Debra, Nicole).

Ethics of using photography.

Using photography in research raises some ethical questions that are not encountered in other types of qualitative research (Hammond, 2004; Harper, 2005). Most of these issues relate specifically to ethnographic research where the researcher is the photographer, but some are also relevant to auto-photography contexts. First, the researcher must consider how to get permission from people who are photographed by participants, especially if these photos are to be displayed or shared when the research is presented (Hammond, 2004). Harper (2005) explains that there is very little precedent for getting ethics approval for these types of photographs, unless the project is developed as a photojournalism or photodocumentary project. In this research, participants were required to have anyone they photographed, or their parent/guardian, sign a release form. Some participants did not get these forms completed and returned, so those photographs will not be shared through publication or presentations. In one case, a participant

was using photographs she had taken in other contexts, including some photographs from trips she taken through work (Sharon). It would have been impractical to attempt to locate the people in the photographs taken in other countries, particularly when she may not have maintained contact with them; therefore, I will not use those photographs while presenting my research.

Second, the researcher needs to consider questions of anonymity if photographs may reveal identities, locations of their home or work, institutions they are attending or other identifying details. It may be necessary for the researcher to modify photographs to remove identifying details before publishing or presenting the research (Hammond, 2004). However, Harper (2005) argues that people who are photographed may agree to, or even want to, have their image shared, and may not want to remain anonymous. For this research project, participants gave permission for their photographs to be edited by the researcher in order to preserve their anonymity.

Third, taking photographs can give voice to participants, so the researcher needs to be attentive to those voices, and include the participants in the creation of the research (Hammond, 2004). And finally, the researcher needs to take responsibility for using the photographs ethically. As Harper (2005) explains, “this involves understanding the point of view of subjects, especially their thoughts on how and where the images will be used” (p. 760). To address these concerns, I ensured that all participants understood how the photos could be used in presentations and publications, and I requested that they sign a release form allowing me to use their photographs. Because I am using a poststructural

feminist approach, I will present the photographs and the stories from the participants in a way that the readers/viewers can form their own interpretations. As required, the plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by the Education, Extension, Augustana, Campus Saint Jean Research Ethics Board (EEASJ REB) at the University of Alberta. Participants were provided with contact information if they had any concerns about the project. However, I found most participants were very willing to participate and did not have any concerns about sharing the stories and photographs.

Phase 2: Online Focus Group

I too was happy – honoured to be part of this blog. It was a good experience almost to debrief some of the experiences from past online courses. (Barbara)

Following the photo-elicitation interviews, I invited a group of women to participate in an asynchronous, online focus group where, as a group, they reflected on their experiences as learners in a dynamic and collaborative analysis (C. Mann & Stewart, 2000). I participated in the focus group as a facilitator, a role that will be described subsequently. In the following sections, I will examine the theoretical and practical aspects of conducting an online focus group. First, I will examine the theoretical side of online focus groups, namely, why I chose this methodology, the challenges it presented and how it relates to my theoretical

framework. Second, I will look at the procedures I used when I actually undertook my research and conducted the online focus group and the ethical issues I faced.

The Focus Group as a Research Method

The focus group, as a research tool, combines the use of two main qualitative research methods, participant observation and interviewing, thus allowing the researcher to gather information about both participants' responses and their interactions with each other (Madriz, 2000). Focus groups differ from group interviews because interactions between participants are considered as an important source of data (Kitzinger, 1994; Stewart & Williams, 2005). While focus groups are acknowledged as "efficient in the sense that they generate large quantities of material from relatively large numbers of people in a relatively short time" (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 903), they are more than just an efficient way to interview numerous participants simultaneously (Kitzinger, 1994).

The researcher shapes the discussion by "strategically 'focusing' interview prompts" (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 899). However, the degree of structure of the focus group can vary; the researcher may want to allow the participants more or less input into the direction of the discussion based on their own experiences and areas of interest. While, as Kamberelis and Dimitriadis describe, traditionally, focus groups occur in face-to-face settings, online focus groups have been used for many of the same purposes as face-to-face groups and rely on the same structures (Brotherson, 1994 as cited by Monolescu & Schifter, 1999). Underhill and Olmsted (2003) found that in terms of both quantity and

quality of responses, online and face-to-face focus groups are comparable. However, other research finds that online focus groups are not necessarily comparable to face-to-face groups. One study found that participants contribute shorter responses and more statements of agreement in a synchronous online focus group compared to a face-to-face focus group, yet the participants in the online group contributed a more consistent number of comments suggesting that no one dominated the conversation (Schneider, Kerwin, Frechtling, & Vivari, 2002). In agreement that online focus groups are not comparable to face-to-face focus groups, Greenbaum (2002; 2001) argues that market research focus groups cannot, and should not be moved online. As another critique of focus groups, some social scientists view the online focus group as a tool for market research rather than qualitative inquiry (Gaiser, 2008).

Focus groups have been traditionally used in market research or evaluations of services and products (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005; Kitzinger, 1994; Monolescu & Schifter, 1999), in getting participants responses to “media texts” (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 899), and in action research (Kitzinger, 1994). Online focus groups have been used to study viewers’ responses to media messages about AIDS (Kitzinger, 1994), parents’ evaluation of web sites about caring for children with disabilities (Cook & Rule, 2001), and rural nurses who are upgrading their skills (Kenny, 2005). More relevant to my research, they have been used to study rural women’s experience learning online (Meyers, Bennett, & Lysaght, 2004), students’ experiences in online courses (Monolescu & Schifter, 1999), the needs and motivations of women in distance

learning programs (Furst-Bowe, 2002; Furst-Bowe & Dittmann, 2001) and how students approach online learning (Burton & Goldsmith, 2002, June).

Rationale for using an online focus group.

Commonly cited reasons for using an online or virtual focus group include allowing people from different locations to participate in a focus group at different times, increasing convenience for participants, having a digital transcript of the conversation, and decreasing the inhibitions of participants because of anonymity (Burton & Bruening, 2003; Cook & Rule, 2001; Gaiser, 1997, 2008; Kenny, 2005; Rezabek, 2000; Stewart & Williams, 2005). Many of these reasons, particularly the ability to include a diverse group of participants who were already busy with other activities encouraged me to choose a focus group format.

However, these advantages focus primarily on pragmatic reasons for choosing to use technology, and they assume the use of technology does not influence the interactions between participants. Because I believe that computer-mediated communication is impacted by the technology involved, I chose to use an online focus group because it would be reflective of the context in which the participants learn. It created a context similar to that of an online learning context where participants interact through computer-mediated communication. The online focus group allowed participants to share their experiences about learning online in a context that was similar to their learning environments. The focus group setting was designed to recreate relationships that exist in the online learning context, allowing them to be observed and studied. As Paccagnella (1997) explains, it is

necessary to interact with participants in a context that reflects the research context:

Obtaining information about someone's off-line life through on-line means of communication... is always a hazardous, uncertain procedure, not simply because of the risk of being deliberately deceived but also because in such cases the medium itself increases the lack of *ethnographic context*. (p. 4 as cited by Orgad, 2005, p. 52)

In this way, having an online focus group is not an artificial context created for convenience, but a deliberate choice to conduct research within the context that is being studied. This decision reflects Gaiser's (1997) assertion that "if the research question involves an on-line social phenomenon, a potential strength of the method is to be researching in the location of interest" (p. 136). Furthermore, conducting the online focus group allowed participants to interact, and allowed me to observe these interactions, which is a key characteristic of focus group research: "The fact that group participants provide an audience for each other encourages a greater variety of communication [than] is evident within more traditional methods of data collection" (Kitzinger, 1994, p. 108).

Challenges of online focus groups.

The typical challenges of online focus groups are sampling, participants who do not participate, quality of the data, and ethical concerns about anonymity and data storage (Burton & Bruening, 2003; Gaiser, 1997, 2008). I addressed each of these concerns in my research.

First, sampling was only a minor concern, I had eleven women who had expressed interest in my research but who did not participate in the interview phase of my research. One did not have enough experience with online learning, so she was not eligible to participate. Of the remaining ten women, seven joined the focus group. Because I was not concerned about having a random sample, I was able to include all the women who were interested in participating. From a poststructural feminist perspective having a random sample is neither necessary nor possible. Instead, I was more interested in getting women with different backgrounds and educational experiences to share their stories. In fact, the focus group participants added to the diversity of my participants by including women of different ages, different family status, and different geographical locations, who had studied in different programs at different institutions.

Second, the participation levels of participants rose and fell throughout the focus group. The number of responses to my posts ranged from six comments to 31 comments. Some participants were far more vocal than others. Participants posted between three and 36 comments, but most participants posted at least one comment on most of the discussion topics. Two participants were late joining (one was about 3 days late – she did not submit her consent form), the other was over a week late (Michelle), but I felt having new postings and new perspectives would keep the group moving forward. One participant, who did not submit her consent form, told me before the start that she would only be available for the first two weeks of the group but I expected she would be available for most of the discussion so I included her anyway. A number of the online focus group

participants pointed out that they would have preferred not to have to print out and mail the consent form. They expected to be able to complete and submit the required forms (consent form and demographics survey) electronically because we had been communicating electronically and because the focus group was online. The additional step of printing and mailing the form may explain why one participant did not submit the required form.

The reasons for lack of participation are hard to diagnose in an online group, as Cook and Rule (2001) describe, “it [is] difficult at times to determine whether participants [are] thinking, avoiding participation, or experiencing technical difficulties” or in the case of those participants with other family responsibilities, are distracted by what is happening around them (p. 272). One participant specifically mentioned the other things going on her life that prevented her from participating as much as she wanted (Rebecca). In order to encourage participation, I posted new discussion topics every two or three days (11 in total over a period of 22 days). I encouraged participants to sign up to get automatic reminders every time a posting was published, but only three participants signed up. Because of their low sign up rate, I sent email reminders to all participants every time I posted a new discussion topic. I also posted messages to let participants know how the focus group was progressing and what they could expect over the next weeks. As Gaiser (1997, 2008) suggested, I included an introductory posting in order to allow participants to familiarize themselves with each other and “to establish a spatial tone for the new environment” (1997, p. 140). All participants posted some kind of introductory message ranging from a

few sentences to several paragraphs. This posting was one of only two in which all the participants posted a comment.

Third, the quality of the data does not appear to be a major concern at this point; however, in some cases it appears this was more of an online group interview rather than a focus group. I posted the most comments of anyone (44 comments, plus my original posts). I contributed half of the comments in the welcome message where I responded to every comment welcoming each participant individually. As the focus group evolved, I posted fewer comments (about a third of the comments). When I look at the length and content of the comments, many of my comments are short responses acknowledging the contributions of participants and asking questions. The participants generally contributed much longer comments, and while many comments were directed at me or responded to my questions, there were also examples of comments that included references to other participants' comments or statements of agreement or disagreement. Because of the blog format comments were threaded, in some cases, it appeared that participants were responding to comments from other participants, but that was rarely the case. In a few instances, participants addressed their responses to another focus group member or responded to questions posed by another focus group member. They often referred to comments by other participants or used their comments as bridge to their own experiences, but there was limited dialogue. Overall most of the interactions were initiated by or directed at me. While I had envisioned more dialogue between the

participants, there was still valuable data gathered from the women's stories and comments.

In an attempt to avoid leading the focus group participants, I tried to ask questions that would have the women examine issues from different perspectives. It would be unreasonable to claim that my perspectives did not shape the focus group discussions in significant ways because I selected the discussion topics, developed the posts to prompt each discussion, and actively posted questions and responses to encourage discussion. Clearly my interests and ideas shaped the discussion's directions in some ways, but the discussion evolved as I read the women's postings and thought about what they said and how it related to the stories the women I interviewed had shared. Asking questions to clarify and to encourage the discussion also shaped the discussion. However, I did not start the focus group with a set of fixed questions I wanted addressed. The discussion postings grew out of the issues the women raised through their postings. My questions, I hope, prompted them to think more about their experiences or to share other experiences. Furthermore, to encourage the women to share different perspectives, I pointed out that diverse and contradictory perspectives were both welcome and valuable in my research. I also asked them if anyone had examples that were similar or different from the ones provided.

Finally, there were some ethical concerns. Participants were advised of the limitations on privacy and anonymity in the focus group setting. The blog that was used for the focus group was only accessible to focus group participants who had to sign in with a user name and password. I asked that they be attentive to any

personal information they shared. The specifics of the site's privacy controls will be discussed in more detail later.

The challenges identified here do not address the need to ensure that participants have the necessary equipment, software and Internet access for participation. Except for a few brief descriptions of problems (Chase & Alvarez, 2000; Kenny, 2005), most research also fails to address how participants' technical skills, literacy skills and typing abilities can all influence participation levels (Cook & Rule, 2001). These omissions may occur because many online focus groups draw participants who are already familiar with online environments or online communication methods (Burton & Bruening, 2003; Chase & Alvarez, 2000; Rezabek, 2000). These challenges are compounded by issues of access and usage that are influenced, in Canada, by income, level of education and age (Statistics Canada, 2005, 2006). In this research project, I assumed participants had the necessary technical skills, the required hardware and software, and access to the Internet because they were currently enrolled in, or had recently completed, courses online. However, I prepared instructions for accessing the focus group site (Appendix B), and offered technical support by email when it was required. Most participants were able to access the site without any problems, and I worked through email with those who had difficulties. Eventually all participants were part of the conversation. One of the participants only had access to dial-up Internet access; however, that did not prevent her from actively participating in the discussion.

I acknowledge that some participants may have been excluded from this study because they did not have the opportunity to participate in online learning due to income, educational level, English language skills, and literacy level among other factors. As Gaiser (2008) points out, the participants in an online focus group will likely represent those who have the resources to access the technology required for participation. Some may perceive this research as privileging groups who already have access to online learning opportunities; however, my intention has been to include as diverse a range of participants as possible, and to acknowledge and point out how others are unable to access online learning.

Relating this method to my theoretical framework.

I chose to use an online focus group because this approach is consistent with my poststructural feminist theoretical framework. The structure of this focus group was intended to promote dialogue and interaction among participants as I considered the structures that shape their learning experiences. While the participants enjoyed the experience of reading each other's comments and seemed to find the group setting interesting and engaging, I think most of the postings would not be described as dialogue. Participants acknowledged the comments made by other participants and used other participants' comments to bridge to their own experiences. They also included a few social comments:

Hi Barbara:

I hope it is not too late to reply to your post. I think that we must be quite close in age. My children are in their 20's. All live close to us. I have one grandson. He is now 18 months old. I cannot believe how time flies.

I wish you well with your new business. ~ Karen (Karen)

However, most interactions were limited to two or three comments, and usually at least one of those comments was my own.

Participants also had a forum to share their experiences outside of traditional academic structures, to consider the significance of those structures on their learning experiences, and to give voice to their experiences through discussion and sharing.

Focus groups reflect poststructural feminist research methods in that provide an opportunity for hearing multiple voices or “polyvocal texts” (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 888), while the presence of multiple participants ensures that the researcher’s voice is not the only perspective that is reflected in the research (Madriz, 2000). This structure also addresses some concerns about the role of the interviewer/researcher who may be perceived as having power over the participants and over the structure of the interview, the questions asked, and topics addressed (Madriz, 2000). The closeness of the group and the familiar conversational context can make participants feel more comfortable sharing their experiences (Madriz, 2000). When participants share some characteristics it helps them to feel more comfortable, “mitigate[s] against alienation, create[s] solidarity, and enhance[s] community building” (Kamberelis

& Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 897). Furthermore, focus groups affirm and validate women's experiences by allowing them to see that others share their experiences and feelings, thus helping to affirm the value of participants' experiences and possibly creating the solidarity necessary for group members to take action while at the same time acknowledging "contradictions and complexities" (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005; Madriz, 2000, p. 838). Focus groups also acknowledge women's experiences and the diverse forms of knowledge they produce by "opening up possibilities for reimagining knowledge as distributed, relational, embodied, and sensuous" (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 898).

Focus groups are also concerned with the "group" aspect of the discussion. Having participants in a focus group can build synergy as they share experiences with each other – a situation that is not possible in one-on-one interviews (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005). The focus group participants examine a topic by "engaging in dialogue, sharing ideas, opinions, and experiences, and even debating with each other" (Madriz, 2000, p. 841). Consistent with poststructural feminist understandings, the focus group recognizes the entire research process is a conversation between the researcher, participants, academic literature and social structures. Furthermore, in a focus group context, the interactions between participants are recognized as an important source of data. Interactions between participants are examined as part of the analysis process (Kitzinger, 1994) unlike in a group interview. This approach allows the researcher to recognize and consider the importance of social interactions. In this project, I would evaluate the interactions as somewhere on a continuum between a group interview and focus

group, with aspects of both being present. The quantity and time of interactions will be discussed more later.

Focus groups provide a space for reflection and social action. Madriz (2000) points out “women have historically used conversation with other women as a way to deal with their oppression” (p. 839). Focus groups have been used by feminist researchers to provide women with the opportunity to share their “daily experiences through collective stories and resistance narratives that are filled with cultural symbols, words, signs, and ideological representations that reflect the different dimensions of power and domination that frame women’s quotidian experiences” (Madriz, 2000, p. 839). In fact, Madriz (2000) points out that the process of creating groups to discuss common concerns is a type of political statement, regardless of the research topic: “In a culture that highlights individualism and separation, shifting the research agenda in the direction of commonality and togetherness is, in itself, subversive” (p. 841). Focus groups also provide a space for challenging power relationships within the research process by allowing participants to shape the direction of discussion and by ensuring that the researcher’s voice is only one voice among many (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005; Madriz, 2000). Furthermore, as a researcher, I acknowledge “qualitative research is always already political – implicated in social critique and social change” (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 898). As Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2005) explain, “Focus group research is a key site or activity where pedagogy, politics, and interpretive inquiry intersect and interlamine each other”

(p. 903). They point out that focus groups combine educational goals with research and social action, much as I intend to do in my own research.

Focus Group Procedures

Although I originally intended to invite the women who participated in the interviews to also participate in the focus group, I decided to invite a different group of women to be part of the focus group. One reason was to access a more diverse sample. For example, none of the interview participants had young children at home, but the online focus group participants included two women with young children. Another reason was that I had a number of women interested in participating in my research who lived far enough away that having a face-to-face interview was not feasible. I decided that the photo-elicitation interview format could not be easily adapted to a telephone interview situation, yet I wanted the input from these participants. The focus group was also a way to include a geographically diverse group of women in the study. Unlike the interview participants, the focus group participants were located across Canada (Alberta, BC and Ontario) and from both urban and rural/isolated communities.

Timeline.

From February 1 to 21, 2010, seven women participated in an online focus group. My initial estimate was that the focus group interactions would take between one-and-a-half weeks and three weeks. I posted formal postings for the first two weeks of the focus group, but I allowed a full week at the end for participants to read and post messages before I removed the site.

Prior to the start of the focus group, I communicated through email with participants to ensure they received and signed a consent form, and completed the same demographics form as the interview participants. Before the first day of the focus group, I asked that each participant create a user id and sign on to the focus group web site to ensure there were no technical difficulties that would interfere with their participation.

This focus group's participants interacted asynchronously over a period of three weeks to share and discuss their experiences as women learning online, and to reflect on emerging themes from my initial analysis of the interview transcripts. While some online focus groups can last as long as month or more (Rezabek, 2000), I chose a shorter timeline in order to accommodate the participants who were busy with other commitments and would not be able to set aside time if a longer commitment was required. Gaiser (1997) argues that shorter timelines may prompt more "impulse responses" (p. 139), which could provide important data that is not available when participants take longer to reflect on their comments. Spencer (2005) also found participants preferred a short commitment although this timeframe does limit how long participants have to consider multiple questions and to create a cohesive community among participants. However, in comparison to a face-to-face focus group, an online focus group extends the length of time the participants have to discuss questions, reflect on their comments and those of others, and contribute to further discussions (Burton & Bruening, 2003). This additional "time gained from the incubation of ideas shared" (Rezabek, 2000, Background of the Study section, para. 1) should

contribute to getting meaningful responses, and allow participants time to reflect before formulating their responses (Cook & Rule, 2001). Since discussion is usually more focused on the research topic, online focus groups produce shorter discussions (Cook & Rule, 2001).

In scheduling this online focus group, I considered the other commitments of the participants. Some participants were studying online or in face-to-face settings, and they all had other commitments in their work, family and personal lives. Two participants were delayed in joining the group and one had to end her participation early because of other commitments. And, throughout the focus group discussion it was obvious that some participants were able to commit different amounts of time on different days. Often a participant would post a number of comments in response to different questions in close succession, suggesting she had just logged on to her computer and was catching up on the discussion. In response to my posting about the experience of the focus group, one suggestion was to change the length of the focus group in order to decrease the frequency of posts:

I would recommend changing the length to 4 weeks and keeping the topics/questions to a maximum of 2/week. This would give me more time to respond. Sometimes I had trouble keeping up with new posts, especially if they came midweek. (Tracy)

I was not sure of the exact time commitment that would be required of participants prior to the focus group. A few participants asked, and I tried to explain my expectations as clearly as possible. I helped participants plan their

participation by posting updates on the scheduling of posts throughout the focus group.

Structure.

Monolescu and Schifter (1999) describe how to organize an online focus group activities around three steps: (1) reading and posting responses to prompts, (2) reading others' comments, and (3) reflecting on other comments and posting final reflections. I tried to follow this model. I started each posting with a prompt. Participants were then invited to read my prompt and respond to it. I also asked that they read and respond to the comments of the other women. As the discussion went on, I added additional questions in response to the comments posted. Multiple conversations on different topics occurred over the three weeks as participants returned to earlier topics and responded to my questions and to the comments of the other participants.

However, before starting any of these activities, participants were given the opportunity to introduce themselves and provide whatever details about their background they felt comfortable sharing with the group. These introductory posts remained accessible for the duration of the focus group. I developed the focus group prompts from the discussion in the focus group and from themes that emerged from the interview data that I wanted to further explore (see Table 2 for discussion topics and schedule or Appendix H for full text of each of my postings). I also referred to the interview data when asking participants additional questions during the discussions.

Table 2
Titles of Focus Group Postings and Publication Dates

Posting title	Date published	Notes
Welcome!	January 25	All participants were asked to post a welcome message to introduce themselves and to confirm they were able to access the site.
Starting the discussion	February 1	
Flexibility – what do you think?	February 2	
The learning online part of online learning	February 8	
Focus group schedule	February 8	An administrative message about the posting schedule.
Tensions and online learning	February 10	
Technology tensions	February 12	
The focus group experience	February 14	
Final thoughts	February 14	
What happens next?	February 14	An administrative note about the next steps in my research.
More about my experiences	February 21	Responses to questions from a participant about my experiences.

The discussion was intended to gather rich data about the participants' experiences constructing knowledge in online learning settings and to allow them to form an interactive dialogic exchange group around their shared experiences. While some of the women describe their involvement in the focus group as being part of a group, an analysis of the transcripts show there was only limited interaction between the women. Most of the comments responded to my original postings and subsequent questions. Some comments either acknowledged or referred to comments made by other participants, but, in general, dialogue occurred between the women and me, the moderator. It is clear from the comments the women made that they felt safe and comfortable communicating in the group. They are even willing to talk about sensitive topics, like finances.

Hello Ladies, I am joining this conversation a little late but I am delighted to be among all of you hard-working and determined women. (Michelle)

I think I would enjoy learning with a group like the one we have established here. (Michelle)

Usually I would avoid talking about financial issues online, but because this is a private blog, I thought that I should mention it. Perhaps this is not a tension anyone else in this group feels, or would like to share thoughts about. (Karen)

I now realize that other online learners had many of the same experiences that I did. Wish I had this experience while I was doing online courses, rather than afterwards. Sometimes it felt like I was the only online learner in the world. (Tracy)

I really enjoyed the blog and each of the entries. I looked forward to our choir practice too [this is a reference to a story shared in the focus group about the challenges of communicating online]. Thanks. (Barbara)

However some of the women recognized that even in this environment, there were limits on what they would discuss with people they did not know:

That said, I kind of like the anonymity. And despite the anonymity, there are some things that I still did not write because I was unsure of our group

dynamics or the members' politics. (Michelle)

Approximately twice a week new topics were introduced, according to the flow of the discussion. Based on the flow of postings, this schedule was adjusted to allow participants more time to respond. Participants were able to reflect on and refer to earlier posts and continue to discuss each post until the focus group ended, which was a full week after my last discussion topic was posted.

As the focus group's moderator, I had strategies for encouraging participation, addressing conflict, and exploring issues in more detail (see also Cook & Rule, 2001; Gaiser, 1997; C. Mann & Stewart, 2000). I posed questions to encourage participation and to probe for more details. I also emailed reminders each time a new posting was ready to encourage participation.

At the end of the focus group, participants were prompted to reflect on their experience of participating in this focus group. They generally enjoyed the experience and found it to be an interesting experience as they describe below. Some of the participants point out that, similar to their online learning experiences, they wished they would have had more time to be involved in the discussion. In this way, the experience of participating in the focus group helped to highlight some of the tensions of learning online.

I enjoyed the experience of participating in a blog, it is nice to be able to read and respond to other's postings rather than just answering a survey and not seeing any of the other data until the research is complete and compiled. Although, there were times where there was a lot of reading and

I felt intimidated by the length and/or quality of other's responses.

(Rebecca)

I feel the quality in this blog has been great, one of the best that I have seen. Another very good forum I was a part of was with minority women in Japan. I wonder if women's forums always reflect good quality?

(Probably not.) I suspect our group, as the other one in Japan, was made up of very educated women. (Michelle)

I also felt it was nicer to read others responses, rather than just fill in a survey and not see what other people had to say. (Tracy)

I really enjoyed this experience, much more than a survey. The only tension I felt was time limitations or time management. (Michelle)

I experienced the same time tension participating in the study as I do with online learning. I am interested and engaged in the process but have not participated as much as I would like. (Rebecca)

Where necessary, I followed up with focus group participants to clarify details of their demographics forms immediately following the focus group.

Facilitating the focus group.

I served as the facilitator or moderator in this focus group, a role that requires maintaining “a delicate balance between influence that can increase moderator bias and sustenance of the work of the group by providing adequate leadership” (Gaiser, 1997, p. 140). To assume this role, I familiarized myself with

the blog site and its features. I reviewed the focus group comments regularly to monitor engagement, to post additional probes, and to respond to questions (Burton & Bruening, 2003). To ensure I was aware of the ongoing discussions, I had email notification sent to me every time a new comment was posted.

Gaiser (1997) recommends clearly delineating the moderator's role and expectations at the beginning of the group to clarify how the process will be managed. Gaiser (1997, 2008) also recommends being prepared to be flexible. Kitzinger (1994) explains that the facilitator can encourage interactions through moderating techniques like "urging debate to continue beyond the stage it might otherwise have ended, challenging people's taken for granted reality and encouraging them to discuss the inconsistencies both between participants and within their own thinking" (p. 106). Cook and Rule (2001) remind moderators that online focus groups are not exactly the same as face-to-face ones. Because I see this research as a collaborative process, I felt that my role as moderator should extend beyond the traditional role. I shared some of my experiences as an online learner with the other participants. I did postpone answering some questions posted by a participant until the end of the focus group because I wanted participants to share their own perspectives first (Gaiser, 2008).

I may have been perceived as having power because of my roles as researcher and facilitator. Specifically, my power stemmed from several conditions: I created the online context for the focus group and shaped it to meet the needs of my research project. I started the discussion by posting questions I wanted to have answered, and I moderated the focus group to ensure it addressed

issues of importance to me. Other topics were discussed, and may turn out to be important, but my own preconceptions and research questions shaped how I started the discussion. I was also the only person who had background demographic information from all the participants. However, I provided participants with as much control over the content and set-up of the focus group as was feasible. While participants theoretically had access to the site set up, none of them used it. I think that participating in the focus group was their priority, not being involved in the background workings of the blog site.

Gaiser (1997, 2008) acknowledges it is challenging to find balance between providing enough feedback to keep the discussion moving without influencing the direction it takes. My schedule helped keep me out of the conversation during the day. During the day, I only had time to read each new comment as a notification message in came to my email account so I saw each comment as an individual statement out of context, which allowed me to reflect on each one. Usually once a day, I would review all the comments in the context of the threaded discussion and then post my comments and questions. My inability to post more frequent questions throughout the day made me limit my input and to reflect on the comments of the day so I could pose questions that arose out of more than one posting. Nonetheless, as the focus group was progressing, I repeatedly felt it was moving more towards a group interview where I would post questions and participants would answer. However looking at the transcripts gave me more perspective on the interactions between participants. In retrospect, I probably could have stepped back and let the conversation evolve

with less input from me. However, this was my first experience moderating an online focus group and I was excited about the possibilities of the discussion.

One challenge moderating the online group was the lack of visual and auditory cues from participants indicating emotion, questions or uncertainty. As a moderator and a researcher I had to be aware of the differences between face-to-face and computer-mediated communication, and to be attentive to “verbal cues” (Gaiser, 1997, p. 142, 2008) while moderating and analyzing. In this focus group, all the participants were familiar with and experienced with online discussions from their online courses. However, participants mentioned the challenge of communicating without visual interactions:

It really showed me again the pitfall of distance and lack of body language. (Barbara)

To make it easier for participants to feel connected, Cook and Rule (2001) recommend having a face-to-face meeting or focus group followed by online focus group discussions. While I did not have a face-to-face meeting of all the participants prior to the focus group, I communicated with each participant individually by email before the focus group, and in some cases, during the focus group, to answer questions and provide technical support.

Another challenge, unique to facilitating focus groups and other research approaches that involve multiple participants, is that participants may feel uncomfortable expressing opinions that do not conform to what they perceive as the dominant perspective in the group (Kitzinger, 1994). Madriz (2000) points out this is particularly a concern with women but that it can occur in any group.

However, Cook and Rule (2001) found that participants were more willing to point out problems with products or services in an online focus group than they were in a face-to-face setting, and that in the absence of paralinguistic cues, sometimes critical remarks could disturb the group discussion. Similarly, Gaiser (2008) states “online, the pressure to conform is likely to be greatly reduced” (p. 297.) As a moderator and researcher, I tried to make it very clear to participants that their opinions, whether or not others or I shared them, were valuable. I asked participants if they had experiences that supported or contradicted statements. In fact, perspectives that are not shared by everyone may be especially important in understanding the diversity of participants’ experiences. Participants seemed quite willing to share how their experiences were different from the experiences described by others.

There was only one interaction that could be characterized as a conflict. In one of my final posts, I asked participants to reflect on their experiences in the focus group. One participant stated she “felt intimidated by the length and/or quality of other’s responses” (Rebecca). A few participants acknowledged that their postings may have been longer or more frequent than others, but one participant seemed quite hurt by the comment:

I was enjoying the blog experience immensely until I read [Rebecca’s] comment about feeling “...intimidated by the length and/or quality of other’s postings”. This comment has made me feel absolutely horrible. I am humiliated. My intention was to be open, friendly and inviting, but the opposite has been perceived. (Karen)

Because I knew most participants had posted their final comments, I emailed Rebecca to let her know her comment had prompted a number of responses. She chose to post a response explaining that her comment was a reflection of her own feelings of guilt about not having been able to contribute as much as she wanted and about her feelings that she had not been able to achieve the standards she set for herself in posting. I also emailed Karen to advise her that there had been a response to her comment because it was posted right at the end of the focus group, only a few hours before I planned to close the discussion. My emails to these participants were intended to ensure that both participants were aware their comments had prompted responses, so they would have the opportunity to respond.

Because all of the participants had experience with online learning contexts, I assumed they were familiar with conventions for online discussions. As a facilitator, I left the guidelines for participation very open, only requesting that participants take necessary steps to protect their own privacy and that of other participants. There was only one situation in the focus group when I requested a participant edit her introductory posting to remove the URL of her business's web site. Despite their previous experience with online discussions, or perhaps because their experience is primarily in formal academic contexts, there was limited use of emoticons or "smileys". There were only five examples of participants using emoticons and three of those examples were in the "Welcome" posting and of those three, I used one of them. In another example, Rebecca acknowledges the limitation of expressing herself online by stating "I wish it were easier to portray

smiling with out resorting to this ☺. Thanks for listening.” Gaiser (2008) suggests that participants may use emoticons to replace the missing visual cues, but that did not appear to be the case here.

The space and place of the focus group.

Facilitating an online focus group raises interesting questions about the role of space and place in focus groups. These characteristics have been identified as important factors in determining relationships of power and in ensuring familiarity for the participants (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005; Madriz, 2000). While the online environment should be familiar to participants who have taken courses online prior to participation in this research project, it may be more challenging to ensure the focus group discussions take place in “safe spaces where women feel comfortable, important, and validated” (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 898). This issue may be of particular concern if the participants do not feel comfortable with the technology being used, if technical problems interrupt the discussion, if participants do not feel their privacy is sufficiently protected, or if the atmosphere of the discussion is not inclusive and supportive. As a researcher and moderator, I considered these concerns throughout the research process. I carefully reviewed the options for both free and paid blogging sites. I settled on WordPress because it gave me the flexibility I wanted as a moderator while also allowing me to create a private site for participants. The WordPress documentation states that employees can access private sites if required to address technical problems (Mark (WordPress.com support), 2009, April 18; WordPress.com), but other than that, the site is only accessible by password to

users I identified. I ensured that participants were aware of the security level of the site before starting the focus group by outlining the information in my consent form and in the first blog posting.

Software for the blogging interface.

In order to facilitate ongoing collaboration with research participants, and to conduct the focus group portion of this research, I developed an online “space” for this focus group. Using a blog for a focus group appears to be a relatively new and unique approach. There is only one mention of using a blog for a focus group in Gaiser & Schreiner (2009), and it referred to using a public blog.

Blogging as a process has been described as democratic and inclusive because it allows anyone with Internet access to share ideas, information and reflections with a large potential audience. They reflect the characteristics of Web 2.0 including “collaborative content creation, using the networking and linking features of the Internet” (Wakeford & Cohen, 2008, pp. 308-309). Blog readers then have the opportunity to add comments in response to the blogger's post, creating a dialogue between the blogger and those who comment (Gaiser & Schreiner, 2009); furthermore, bloggers include links to other blogs creating another type of dialogue between blogs (Wakeford & Cohen, 2008). Usually interactions are not moderated or facilitated, though spam detection software can be used to monitor postings for inappropriate or irrelevant comments. In these ways, a blog can, in theory, provide an opportunity for collaborative knowledge building. However, in this case, the blogging interface was used to create a pseudo-discussion forum. First, unlike a traditional blog, membership was

restricted to participants in the focus group. Second, I facilitated the discussion on the blog to ensure it remained relevant to the research and to encourage participation. Third, because the blog was private, it did not become part of a network of related blogs where blogs, readers and content are linked (Wakeford & Cohen, 2008).

For the purpose of this focus group, I used a free web-based, blogging interface called WordPress (<http://www.wordpress.com>). I chose it for its features that facilitated an online discussion, its security features, its accessibility online and its ease of use, all of which are identified as important considerations by Gaiser (2008).

First, WordPress provided tools for easily posting graphics and text material. As the blog administrator, I could control which tools were available to the participants and I could remove unnecessary features to simplify the blogging interface. WordPress was a useful tool for facilitating an online discussion because it allowed me to set up an environment where participants could interact around different topics by starting posts. They could also comment on each other's comments, which gave the appearance of a threaded discussion, a format that should have been familiar to participants from their previous online courses.

Second, WordPress offered security features to ensure a private discussion. I set up a private blog so only people who were invited to participate could view the site. Participants were required to create their own user name and then use it to login to this focus group discussion. Selecting a name allowed them to shape their online identities and protect their privacy. Having participants

register before participating, also allowed me to confirm their identities while participants could select a username within the group to maintain anonymity (Stewart & Williams, 2005). The selection of screen names included variations on participants' names, in some cases, and pseudonyms, in others. Some participants chose to share their first names in the focus group and others did not. The fact that the participants never have met each other face-to-face increases the degree of anonymity within the focus group. While the blog was technically accessible by support personnel who operated it, the risk of their reading the focus group content was considered very small (Mark (WordPress.com support), 2009, April 18; WordPress.com, 2010), but participants were made aware of this possibility.

Third, this blog interface is web-based, which ensured the participants did not receive a large number of email messages. However, it allowed them the option of getting reminder messages when new postings were added to the blog. About half of the participants did not choose to sign up for reminders, so I sent email reminders with each new post. The web-based interface also allowed participants to access the site at their own convenience from any Internet connection (Kenny, 2005).

Finally, this type of interface, while new to some participants, did not require any special technical skills. Ease of use for both the participants and the researcher is an important consideration when choosing an interface (Gaiser & Schreiner, 2009, p. 18), as is having a plan for ensuring participants understand how to use the interface (Gaiser, 2008). Participants were provided with instructions to login, read, and post material, and I was prepared to provide some

technical support. There was only one participant who had trouble accessing the site, but I was able to help her out by email. The participants also found ways to make using the blogging interface more effective for them. Karen, who accessed the blog using a dial-up Internet connection, was especially attentive to using her time online efficiently:

I chose to have emails sent to me when others posted to the blog. This worked except when a new subject thread was posted. I found that I could not simply check off the email notice box to have new subject thread postings come to my email. I had to post a comment before checking off the box [to receive email notification] worked. (Karen)

I usually wrote responses in a Word document and then pasted them into blog comment box. This ensured that I did not lose a reply due to faulty connection. (Karen)

Ethics and online focus groups.

With an online focus group, it is important to address the additional ethical issues unique to online research. Addressing these ethical questions is further complicated by the limited research and guidelines regarding ethical issues in online research. However, Williams and Robson (2004), state that online focus groups need to consider “both codes of conduct relating to behavior in computer-mediated communities, and the codes of conduct relating to the practice of social research” (p. 40).

First, guaranteeing anonymity is impossible since a computer message can be traced to the computer from which it originated (Eynon, Fry, & Schroeder, 2008; Gaiser, 1997, 2008; Williams & Robson, 2004). Participants were made aware of the risks of participation while they were informed of the steps being taken to maintain anonymity such as conducting the focus group on a restricted, password-protected site and allowing participants to select screen names or pseudonyms for use during the focus group (Burton & Bruening, 2003; Eynon, et al., 2008; Gaiser, 2008). These security measures protected participants' comments from outside observations. In this research, anonymity referred to the participants in the focus group not being identifiable to each other and not being identified outside the focus group setting. In the WordPress blog anonymity was limited by the fact that company employees could access the blog to address technical problems (Mark (WordPress.com support), 2009, April 18; WordPress.com, 2010); however, no technical issues arose during this focus group.

Second, because a focus group is a public setting, confidentiality is also an issue. Despite the lack of anonymity online, many Internet users feel more comfortable sharing personal experiences in online contexts, including learning, research and social environments, because they can use pseudonyms and feel more anonymous (Eynon, et al., 2008; McKenna & Seidman, 2005; Monolescu & Schifter, 1999; Pagnucci & Mauriello, 1999). Within the focus group, participants were free to share their names and details of experiences. However, participants were also advised that they did not need to share any identifying details within the

focus group setting. Participants responded by sharing different degrees of detail within the focus group.

Third, online research creates a permanent digital record of all interactions (Eynon, et al., 2008). Since the focus group occurred over a number of weeks, participants had the opportunity to reflect on their comments and clarify their statements. None of the participants requested that their comments be revised or removed after they were posted, though this could have potentially occurred. Following the focus group's conclusion, the blog site materials were copied on to my computer and the site was deleted. Because it was a private blog, and because it was removed following the focus group's conclusion, the content should remain private.

Including Multiple Methods

Using multiple research methods allowed for exploration of the research question from different perspectives including face-to-face and online components; one-on-one and group exploration; oral, written and photographic expression; autoethnography and collaborative knowledge construction (Creswell & Maietta, 2002). It is not uncommon to use focus groups and interviews together to “enhance understandings by adding layers of information, and by using one type of data to validate or refine another” (Gaiser, 2008, p. 292). The use of more than one method of data collection allowed me to learn about participants' experiences from different perspectives. This approach provided different access points to the participants' experiences by relying on oral, visual and textual

communication. The inclusion of multiple methods of data gathering and analysis helps to provide depth and authenticity, or trustworthiness to the data (Olesen, 2000), and it helps to crystallize themes by reconsidering them from different perspectives (L. Richardson, 1994). Including both individual and group components allowed me to interact with the participants, and the participants to interact directly.

Rigour and Trustworthiness Issues

Ensuring trustworthiness of the research is critical in all research; therefore, numerous steps were taken to ensure trustworthiness. First, interview transcripts were returned to participants, allowing them the opportunity to clarify and correct the content. Most participants reviewed their transcripts and responded when asked to clarify and expand their comments. Some participants made further revisions of their own to clarify their responses. Second, multiple methods and different groups of participants were used to approach the research question, which helped to establish the trustworthiness of the results by including a greater diversity of perspectives and different ways of exploring experiences. Third, emergent themes were shared with research participants during the focus group to get their input on the authenticity of the conclusions.

Ethics

This research was conducted according to the ethics guidelines of the Tri-Council and the University of Alberta. Participants were required to sign a consent form prior to participation in the research project. More details about the

ethical issues related to the photo-elicitation interviews and the online focus group were previously discussed as I outline each phase of the research.

Data Analysis

The transcribed interview data and electronic focus group data were coded based on emergent themes, which included the tensions women identified in their experiences as online learners. I analyzed the women's stories using a multi-perspective theoretical framework to focus on the experiences of women and the institutional structures that influence them (Olesen, 2000). The computer program Atlas.ti was used to facilitate coding and organize interview and focus group transcripts.

The photo-elicitation interviews were analyzed by using transcribed descriptions of the photos provided by the participants rather than the photographs themselves. This approach has been used by other researchers to analyze written and oral descriptions of photographs in conjunction with the photographs (see Frohmann, 2005; Harrington & Schibik, 2003). By relying on the participants' descriptions of the photo, my analysis reflects the perspective of the participants' rather than my interpretation of the photograph. Taylor (2002) refers to this approach as "indirect analysis" where "the photographs are interpreted by the participant and not the researcher as part of the interview process" (Analysing Still Photography section, para. 1). This system removed some of the challenges associated with the analysis of visual content which are "invisibly encoded with numerous filters [that] represent a 'map' of clients' underlying value system and related belief structure" (Weiser, 2001, Techniques of PhotoTherapy section,

para. 1). Some photographs are included in the written dissemination of the results. This presentation allows readers to see the images and to create their own interpretations, which will not necessarily reflect my interpretations as a researcher.

The interview data and descriptions of the photographs and focus group transcripts were analyzed by looking for patterns and themes in participants' descriptions of their photographs and their comments about the images and their experiences in online learning. Specifically, I was "look[ing] for larger patterns of repeated themes, personal symbols and metaphors, and other visual information that the client might have been unaware of themselves at the time of taking the picture" (Weiser, 2001, Techniques of PhotoTherapy section, para. 11). This approach examined themes related to the tensions the women identified in their experiences as online learners. Some themes that emerged from the interview transcript analysis were shared with participants during the focus group. Another layer of analysis took place following the focus group to examine the input from focus group participants and the interactions that occurred during the focus group.

Williams and Robson (2004) state that online data can be interpreted based on three elements: form, style and content. They further explain that the type of online interactions and the researcher's questions will determine which are most appropriate to a particular context. In this focus group, the analysis focused on content, though the other elements were helpful in understanding relationships between participants. This approach reflects Williams and Robson's assertion that "asynchronous modes, such as e-mail, are less likely to be littered with stylistic

responses, with more focus on content, fostering more considered narratives” (p. 40). However, I was also attentive to the interactions between participants so I incorporated Kitzinger’s (1994) suggestion of coding transcripts for “certain types of interaction between participants such as ‘question’, ‘cited source’, deferring to the opinion of others’ and ‘changes of mind’” (p. 114).

Although researchers may claim to include participants in the entire process, “it is the researcher who ultimately cuts and pastes together the narrative, choosing what will become part of it, and what will be cut” (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 697). By sharing some of my reflections on the interview data with the focus group participants, I allowed participants an opportunity to provide some input into the analysis process. For example, here are some excerpts from my comments in the focus group discussion (for the complete text of my postings, but not my comments in the discussion, see Appendix H):

Tracy said “When my studying isn’t going well, it’s easy to switch to work (which is also online), put in a load of laundry or call my husband or friends at work.”

I’ve heard this kind of comment from other women too. I hope my question doesn’t sound critical, but I’m trying to better understand what is going on here. Why is a bad thing (or is it?) to take time away from your online courses to do something else?

Jenna

Barbara,

That's a great image - the elastic that can only stretch so far. It sounds like you learned about how to be a successful student from your online experiences. Does anyone else have any examples of things they learned that weren't part of the curriculum?

So, it sounds like you like the flexibility of choosing when to work even if it takes you longer. Do other people think online learning takes more time?

Some of my interview participants said they feel like learning online is a more efficient use of their time. I'm curious what you think about the workload when you are learning online.

Jenna

Tracy,

I've heard this from other online learners too. In another study I was involved in, students seemed to get competitive as they felt their posts had to be as long and as detailed as other students.

Did the time limits help? Were you still able to meet the class requirements in a shorter time or did you have to shorten your posts?

Did you find online discussions were a helpful part of your learning or do you feel your time would have been better spent working on other assignments?

Jenna

Furthermore, using interviews, in combination with presenting participants' responses in a way that readers can hear their voices, challenges traditional approaches of analyzing interview comments by presenting them in a way that supports the researchers' arguments in order to inform readers. However, as the researcher, I realize that I ultimately shape the text and decide where and how participants' voices are heard.

Hopefully this research will lead to results that will benefit both practitioners and policy makers. Ideally, it will provide further understanding of women's experiences as online learners, which will contribute to the existing research in this area. As Harper (2000) points out, photographs can be used "to [both] confirm and [to] develop existing theory" (p. 729).

Using a poststructural framework allows my analysis to acknowledge the ambivalence and contradictory responses I gathered from these women. It provides a space for recognizing that not all the women feel the same way about their learning experiences, and in some cases their responses are not even consistent within themselves. Rather than disregarding this data as "unreliable," I use it to highlight the complex nature of women's experience learning online.

Researching myself.

Consistent with my poststructural feminist approach, I reflected on my role in the research process and my own experiences as an online learner throughout this experience (Lather, 1991). I attempt to make my own experiences as a woman learning online explicit by sharing excerpts from my own narrative (Blakey, 2003) alongside those of the research participants. These narrative

vignettes are located following each chapter of this dissertation. This narrative is a “hidden chapter” (Britzman, 2000, p. 30) that illustrates my own background and biases in undertaking this research. It answers some questions about “who I am, who I have been, who I think I am, and how I feel” (Pillow, 2003, p. 176).

Sharing my narrative also demonstrates that my thinking on this topic is not static; I have changed my perceptions, expectations and approaches as I have continued to examine the experiences of women learning online from different perspectives and using different approaches. By including my own experiences, I acknowledge that “every telling is constrained, partial, and determined by the discourses and histories that prefigure” (Britzman, 2000, p. 32), which are true of both my narrative and the rest of this text (Tierney, 2002). They both include and exclude different ideas and experiences, as I made choices about what to add and what to remove. Even after my decisions are made, readers then bring their own experiences to the text and “challenge and rearrange what it is that structures the readers’ own identity imperatives” thereby creating their own unique texts (Britzman, 2000, p. 39). This process of researching, writing, revising and reflecting is a “struggle towards ways of knowing which can move us beyond ourselves” (Lather, 1991, p. 83).

Presenting the Research

In order to illustrate both the differences and similarities among the 12 women who were part of this research project, I will share the women’s experiences through their own narratives and photographs that illustrate aspects of their experiences. I have selected a few short vignettes to illustrate some of the

themes that appeared in each interview or focus group transcript. I have titled each vignette with a phrase from the transcripts. Rather than presenting their descriptions in the form of interviews or dialogues, I reorganized and edited to make their stories flow. I have tried not to change their words; however, it was necessary to remove repetitive pieces and reorganize some information to make it clearer for the reader. These narrative vignettes are interspersed through the chapters of this dissertation, with the intent being that “the text is used to display rather than to analyze” (Lather, 1991, p. 150). I grouped the vignettes based on themes (moms with young children, self-employed women, doctoral students etc). The vignettes are generally organized from the younger participants to the older ones.

I am also including my own found narrative vignette, which expands on my own experiences learning online (Blakey, 2003). From a poststructuralist perspective, this layering of texts will help readers to create their own understanding as they explore these various kinds of texts. It should also deepen readers’ understandings of this topic and increase the credibility and impact of the writing: a text “should inform and engage readers so that they feel compelled to become involved in social change” (Tierney, 2002, p. 397).

In this research, I want the reader to read and consider the experiences of these women. While I can, and have, identified some common themes, looking at the “big picture” will help educators and researchers to appreciate the experiences of women learning online, and the tensions they experience. The only way to

understand their diverse experiences is to interact with their words and photos, or their discussions, to hear their voices.

However, it is important to note that as the researcher I constructed the narrative vignettes from my analysis and interpretations of the data, and the photos and narratives I chose, the ways they were put together, and ideas they reflect are all shaped by perspectives and the perspectives that I chose to share. As Fine (1998) explains, “When we construct our texts in or on their words, we decide how to nuance our relations with/for/despite those who have been deemed Others” (p. 139), or in this case we decide how to present their words in ways that reflect our objectives. Likewise, Lather (2000) describes the “crisis of representation” she faced while trying to write a book that would both “do the work the women wanted” and challenge readers understandings of the “problems of inquiry” (p. 285). As both these authors indicate, the researcher makes decisions about what is included and how it is presented, thereby constructing what is presented based on the researcher’s viewpoint. In other words, inclusion of participants’ voices or images does not remove interpretation; however, it can be a tool to share diverse perspectives and contexts with readers.

This thesis presents a juxtaposition of texts (Lather, 2000) combining narrative with analysis: an examination of the tensions in the research through my literature review (chapter 4), narratives and photos from interview participants and focus group participants (located following each chapter), excerpts from my own narrative (following chapter 8), an analysis of some themes I have identified (chapter 5 and 6) and a theoretical analysis of my research (chapter 7). Together,

these different types of texts will allow readers to situate the research and the researcher (L. Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005), and to consider their own experiences and create their own analysis and response to the topic.

Concluding Perspectives

The combination of photo-elicitation interviews and an online focus group proved to be an effective and interesting way of learning about the tensions women experience learning online. The women enjoyed the experience of sharing their experiences, and I learned both from their stories and from the process of organizing and conducting the research. The tensions the women identified here are not isolated examples. They must be examined within the context of previous research about women learning online and the tensions that exist within that literature.

**WORKING AND STUDYING AT HOME: BARBARA, KAREN AND
TRACY**

Barbara

Program: Graduate certificate in distance education, horticultural therapy certificate (synchronous online program) - not taking online courses at the time of the focus group

Personal situation: Age 56, married, 4 grown children and a grandson, she is considered a student with disabilities (visual)

Employment: Works part time at a college and is starting her own business

Previous/Concurrent Online Experience: Previous unsuccessful experience with correspondence

“Breaking the barriers”

The program I enrolled in definitely did break the barriers regarding admissions, as they let me enter on a 3-year B.Sc. whereas other universities were strict on their 4-year requirement. They were also very helpful when I finally asked for extra services. I believe there was much more available than I took advantage of, and I only asked during my last couple of courses. The barriers were often of my own making, i.e. reluctance to accept them, but because the program was demanding, success demanded that I work on those barriers.

I entered into online studies because I could not take the time to fit into the rigid schedule of the University just 10 minutes walk from home. Also ‘breaking the barriers’ motto was a great draw. I had tried correspondence but that was a

dismal failure. I really liked online, and found that I was learning more than when I was working in class, because it was so independent. One problem however was that I could not keep up with the reading. I have a visual problem that limited the amount of reading I could do , so I had to pick and choose, and learn to skim. That made me less confident when I tried to do the required postings. I became very organized, a skill which I have now carried into other learning environments.

“Group work: it was very difficult to coordinate”

A tension that I don't think was included so far was group work. When we were expected to do group work it was very difficult to coordinate. Without the ftf [face-to-face] ability to discuss things, it was hard to get a handle on whether there was a real consensus on what we were doing. Also, with everyone so busy, I came across students who just wanted to get it done and over with. There seemed to be a lot of waiting for answers/ emails, or missing emails. It is really difficult to work with someone you don't know online, especially with people from different backgrounds. There also seems to be a subconscious thought about whether the effort to develop a relationship will be worth the time and energy if it will be so short term. So in online environments, I think there are different types of relationships than there are in ftf courses and classrooms.

Karen

Program: Masters of Distance Education – completed prior to focus group

Personal situation: Age 50, married, 3 adult children, 1 grandchild

Employment: Self-employed as a consultant

Previous/Concurrent Online Experience: Distance education at k-12 level, working online, will be pursuing PhD online, Teaching assistant/Research Assistant for online course

“I have been accused of cramming more into one lifetime than others do in two”

It reminds me of the adage about giving a task to a busy person, because they will get it done. It seems that the rest of this group is as busy, if not busier, than me. And it was my marriage and my personal time that I sacrificed for the roles of mother, housekeeper, cook, school teacher, seamstress and student. The person I stole the most time from was me. I'd like to say that I have quit doing that, but that isn't so. And I do struggle with what constitutes “me” time. I love my online work, revel in learning, and truly enjoy sewing and knitting. Are these “me” activities?

The choices I made while a student were not so wise. My husband is virtually computer-illiterate. We adopted a practice of him watching TV or reading, while I worked online after the children were in bed. Communication became almost non-existent. My husband is relearning how to have a ‘real’ conversation with me. While I spent my evenings doing tasks for the children, the

animals, my jobs, and studying, he watched TV, read escapist fiction books or listened to the radio. I would secretly seethe because he typically put in a 10-hour work day, and then relaxed. I worked from the time I got up in the morning to the time I quit each night. There was little time for us to talk about anything outside of daily life activities. The good news is that we are learning to set aside time to talk. One thing that seems to work well is a nightly walk together.

“The Internet has opened a whole new world to me”

The little public libraries where I live rarely contain any academic resources that I need. Once I became a member of the local college library I was able to find resources in subject areas that were taught at this college. If I wanted anything else, I had to order it through inter-library loans. I’d often order my borrowing limit (I think it was 10 books at a time), only to discover that more than half of the books were of no use in my research. Thus, time was a factor, too. Much of my work was limited by the availability of resources.

The Internet is the largest, most diverse library that I could hope for. Now, instead of having too few resources, I have too many. Analytical skills are essential in determining what resources are relevant and reliable. In many cases I can make direct contact with a source’s author, which can lead to a richer investigation than what would have been possible by simply accessing the original resource. Timeliness is another bonus – whatever I want to know is at my fingertips. Amazing!

“I lose out on a lot of online offerings”

I am using dial-up, so I have to make sure that any new software program that I want to use is installed and test run long before I need it for class. I was often kicked out of the more robust programs, like Elluminate. I cannot hear most audio clips or view most video clips, and some web pages take a very long time to load. One of the things that my business partner and I keep in mind is that many of our clients live in remote places, and are faced with similar connection problems.

Weather plays a huge factor in my ability to be online. When it is wet, cold or windy, my connection frequently breaks. While conducting an experiment with people in Canada and South America, we discovered that I had the worst connection of all. The single most aggravating aspect of online learning and my current work is the dial up connection that I am forced to use. What makes it almost unbearable is that we live next to a highway. In 2000, we watched them bury high speed cable in the ditch. That cable runs 50 m from where my computer sits. We are told that because our phone lines are copper, not fiber optic, and because our family is only one of a few who want high speed in our farming community, it will not be installed for the foreseeable future.

We looked into microwave, but we live on the wrong side of a hill; we do not have a direct view of the towers. We also looked at satellite. Weather makes it unreliable, so even if I had it installed, I would still need dial-up for backup. I currently pay \$65.00 a month for a connection that breaks at least 2-3 times a day. When weather is bad, it breaks at least a dozen times a day. The main difference

in the bad weather factor between dial-up and satellite is that I can reconnect repeatedly with dial-up. When it is cloudy or stormy, I would have to wait up to hours or days to reconnect by satellite. (However, I am told that the satellite technology is getting much better now... I have hope.)

When I was a child, my grandfather taught me to be a patient fisherwoman. I draw on that patience all of the time. In person, I cannot stand to be late or unprepared. I do not like to disrupt activities or make people wait for me. I view this as selfish and rude behaviour. Thus, I take great pains to make sure that I am in virtual classes long before they start. I organize my time so that any downloads required before an online session are done days beforehand when possible. I often set large downloads to run while I do housework, or sew. Broken connections during downloads or meetings boil my blood. But, I suck in my breath, silently thank my Grandpa, and reconnect.

I looked at some online doctoral programs that appealed to me. However, their minimum hardware requirement included high speed. This automatically disqualified me from enrolling in their programs. Even the Net is guilty of exclusion; thus the term 'digital divide.'

Tracy

Program: Graduate program in Educational Technology – part-time student at time of the focus group

Personal situation: Age 39, married, no children

Employment: Works at home as an instructional designer

Previous/Concurrent Online Experience: Works at home with distance education students

“Tension between studying and the rest of my life”

It can be difficult to make studying a priority when there are so many other distractions in my home – work, family, housework, etc. Lately, my furnace has been acting up and I’ve had contractors in and out fixing it and it’s been impossible to get school (or anything else) done. Over the years, I have developed strategies that help to reduce the distractions/tensions. I set aside specific times each week to study (and follow this schedule), I create priority lists for school and everything else and post them in visible places for easy reference and I try to work ahead a bit so that when real emergencies like the furnace come up, I can miss some studying time without falling too far behind.

Some days were challenging, especially when there were computer problems, but there were also benefits. For instance, I could take a day off in the middle of the week and make up the time on the weekend, if I wanted to.

“We all faced the same challenges”

I remember talking to my peers in person at the meeting when we all gave our final presentations and we all faced the same challenges; mostly time pressures and work pressures. I thought I was the only student who sometimes thought they wouldn’t make it, but that wasn’t the case at all. In fact, three of my peers put off their graduation for another year, because they just couldn’t

complete the work in time. When I heard that, I realized how all students, distance and F2F ones, face similar challenges.

I now realize that other online learners had many of the same experiences that I did. I wish I had this experience of participating in the online focus group while I was doing online courses, rather than afterwards. Sometimes it felt like I was the only online learner in the world.

“Mixed feelings”

I have mixed feelings about my online classes. One of the major challenges for me was participating in the online discussions. As part of an 8-month course, I was required to log-on and post 3 times every week. The first posting had to be at least 250 words and the other 2 were 50-words each. The longer post was related to our weekly reading assignments and the shorter posts were replies to other students' postings. Each semester, I also had to moderate the discussions for a week, which required posting every day. I found this work to be tremendously time consuming! It took me far longer to do this online than it would take to participate in person. I started to fall behind in my other work as a result. Finally, I put time limits on my online participation so that there was still time to do other assignments, like term papers and exams. The time limits did help. I was able to complete my work and meet the minimum posting lengths.

As for how helpful the online discussions were, that was mixed. Sometimes it was helpful to hear from other students, but sometimes they went

off topic or I just couldn't understand what they were trying to say. In the end, I would have preferred spending my time on other assignments.

“The question of technology is such a huge one for online learning”

I hardly know where to start! The university who offered the course picked the type of learning management system I had to use (eg. Moodle, Blackboard) but I had a choice of computer (PC or Mac)...Technology, both when it worked and when it didn't, had a big influence on my learning. When things were working, I connected with lectures, course materials and students who lived far away from me. When technology broke down, I was cut off and couldn't do my work. When this happened, my stress levels increased because I had very few people who could help me solve the technology problems. Oftentimes, I had to figure things out on my own.

CHAPTER 4: WOMEN AND ONLINE LEARNING: A LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I will examine literature related to my research topic. I review the on research about women, and distance and online learning that has been published since the 1990s, though my focus is on women's experiences with online learning. To start, I will provide a brief overview of the research that has been done on gender and online learning. I will then use the idea of tensions as a way to explore the literature: tensions in the research about online learning and tensions that women experience while learning online. However, before these pieces, I will provide some statistics about online learning in Canada to establish the context.

Statistics Canada data show that in 2007 over a third of all Canadians (34%) and nearly half of all Internet users (49.5%) used the Internet for “education, training or school work” (Statistics Canada, 2007c). However, this does not help clarify the current number of online learners. First, since these statistics define users as individuals over 16 years of age, and Internet use is higher among younger populations, many of these users may be high school students using the Internet for schoolwork. Second, the category of “education, training or school work” is ambiguous. It does not identify whether the Internet use is for completion of assignments, for researching educational opportunities, for developing skills through independent or self-directed learning, or for completion of online courses.

In Alberta, there are reportedly 9,000 students taking online courses

through the eCampusAlberta consortium, which does not include those students enrolled in online courses at the University of Alberta, University of Calgary, University of Lethbridge or Athabasca University (Stolte, 2010). The Canadian Virtual University (CVU) (2009), an organization of Canadian institutions offering online courses at the post-secondary levels claims on its home page “Over 100,000 Canadian and international students are taking online and distance courses right now”. However, the source of these statistics is unclear, making it difficult to get an accurate picture of how many people are learning online in Canada.

Gender and Online Learning

Though distance education has been offered in Canada since the late 19th century (Rogers, 1993), there was limited writing about issues of gender and distance learning until the late 1980s and early 1990s (Spronk, 1990). Early authors included Burge, Faith and Coulter (Canada), and Kirkup and von Prümmer (Europe). The *Journal of Distance Education* published a special issue on gender in 1990 (Spronk, 1990). However, despite the journal’s theme of “gender in distance education,” most of the articles focus primarily on women in distance education, affirming as Maynard and Pearsall (1994) suggest, “the issue of gender is often seen or spoken about as something which women have but not men” (p. 229). The focus of these articles implies that research about men is considered the norm, and research about gender actually focuses specifically on women – who are not the norm. More recently, the journal *Computers and*

Composition (Gerrard, 1999), the *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning* (Joiner, Littleton, Chou, & Morahan-Martin, 2006), and the *IEEE Technology and Society Magazine* (Wyer & Adam, 1999/2000) published theme issues on gender. Gerrard (1999) acknowledges how previous research on gender focused on women, but she then explains that the theme issue, which is informed by feminist theory, is intended to “focus principally on how gender influences what men and women are doing with computers and what this technology is doing for them” (p. 1). The *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning* also looks at the experiences of both male and female learners before concluding: “The interaction between gender and technology is complex, being mediated by a number of factors such as status and identity” (Joiner, et al., 2006, p. 319).

Research about online learning tends to “[assume] that gender is either irrelevant or can be ignored as distance education systems are seen to be non-gendered or even to favour women” (von Prümmer, 2004). Much of the current research that does consider gender and online learning either compares men’s and women’s experiences in online learning (for example, see Rovai & Baker, 2005; Wang, Sierra, & Folger, 2003; Wolfe, 1999, 2000) or focuses primarily on women’s experiences (May, 1994); there is very little, if any, research done specifically on men’s experiences in online learning.

Some researchers suggest that gender has been thoroughly examined and there is no need to continue to study this topic. Wang et al. (2003), for example, argue that researchers are focusing too much on gender, so it is becoming “overrate [d],” and there is the risk of “creat[ing] artificial segregation among

learners” (p. 59). However, other researchers call for further research about women’s experiences learning online, especially research that employs feminist research methods and examines power relationships online (Campbell, 2006; Gunn, et al., 2003; Kramarae, 2001; Morgan & Morgan, 2007). Research about learners that examines gender and other characteristics is necessary in order to understand whether gender differences observed in online learning settings “constitute disadvantages or simply differences in interaction styles” (Gunn, et al., 2003, p. 21).

In the rest of this literature review, I will examine research related to women’s experiences in formal, post-secondary online learning contexts, focusing on recent Canadian, American and other English-language sources. This material draws from both the fields of pre-Internet distance education and, more recently, online education since they share many commonalities in terms of educational theory, though they also each have their own unique aspects due to the role of technology in online learning (M. M. Thompson, 2007; von Prümmer, 2004). This literature review will look at perspectives that challenge the commonly held view that online learning is accessible to all learners.

While the focus of this literature review is on women’s experiences, gender should not, and in fact, cannot, be considered in isolation from other demographic factors (i.e. age, race, ability, sexual orientation, etc.) and contextual elements (i.e. course composition, local context, educational context, etc.) (Gunn, et al., 2003). Gunn and her colleagues (2003) ask, based on their case studies, how considering gender as a binary influences research about online learning.

However, other authors acknowledge this challenge but continue to use binary categories of gender in their research, and many authors fail to acknowledge gender as only one characteristic of their participants. They risk essentializing gender over other characteristics. Trauth (2006) points out that research about women and information technology needs to focus more on the “*difference among women*” rather than on the “*difference between men and women*” (p. xxix, italics in original). Likewise, Hyde (2005) asserts that psychological differences between men and women are minimal. However, studies that do not show a significant difference, including differences between genders, are less likely to get published than those that show a significant difference (J. T. E. Richardson, 1997), making it more difficult to publish research about gender that does not affirm gender-based differences. Further research is needed about the intersections of gender, race, class, and other power relationships, as they relate to women’s experiences learning online. It should be noted that research about identity and different subjectivities in more general online contexts, but not specifically in online learning, can be found (for example see Haraway, 2001; McGerty, 2003).

Numerous research methodologies, both quantitative and qualitative, have been used to examine women’s experiences in online learning situations including surveys and questionnaires (D. M. Anderson & Haddad, 2005; Cragg, et al., 2005; Gunn, et al., 2003; Kirkup & von Prümmer, 1990; Kramarae, 2001; Price, 2006; Rovai & Baker, 2005; Wolfe, 1999, 2000), interviews (Cragg, et al., 2005; Kramarae, 2001; May, 1994; Müller, 2008; Price, 2006), focus groups (Furst-Bowe & Dittmann, 2001; Kramarae, 2001), quantitative discourse analysis

(Wang, et al., 2003; Wolfe, 1999, 2000), and case studies (Gunn, et al., 2003; Müller, 2008; Price, 2006). Numerous authors indicate the need for further research about women's experiences online that incorporate feminist research methods and examine online power relationships (Campbell, 2006; Gunn, et al., 2003; Morgan & Morgan, 2007; Ratliff, 2006).

Using “Tensions” to Explore Research and Experience

Much debate surrounds issues related to online learning. In many cases research produces contradictory conclusions, illustrating the inherent complexity of trying to understand a wide field of technological applications that are developed, used and facilitated by different instructors, within different educational contexts, and that are experienced by different users with their own unique subjectivities within their own personal learning environments. Online learning is a complex topic where different fields of study (pedagogy, computer sciences, instructional design, human-computer interface, psychology, sociology, etc.) intersect to create a unique context for learning experiences. Thompson (2007) lists the following disciplines that contribute to interdisciplinary research about online learning: “technical disciplines (...); design disciplines (...); the learning disciplines (...) and the disciplines studying communications, communities and discourse” (Taylor et al., 2004 as cited by M. M. Thompson, 2007, pp. 173-174). Similarly, Anderson and Elloumi (2004) state, “distance education is a discipline that subsumes the knowledge and practice of pedagogy,

of psychology and sociology, of economics and business, of production and technology” (p. xvi).

One way to examine this context is to consider the tensions that exist in the research about women’s online learning and in women’s experiences with online learning. Examining where research results suggest contradictions, and how the sometimes oppositional expectations and experiences of learners interact, is one way of examining existing research, and of framing new research questions. This approach is consistent with a poststructuralist approach because it recognizes that multiple voices each have their own understanding of truth, and each perspective can bring understanding to the issue, but an absolute truth will never be discovered (Strega, 2005).

Tensions in the Research

Numerous areas of tension continue to exist in the research about online learning, which often produces contradictory and oppositional findings. As a result, perspectives about the effectiveness of the use of Internet communication technologies in education “[run] the gamut of views from utopian to apocalyptic” (Van Dusen, 2000, p. iii). Tensions in the research, which will be examined here, include:

- (1) Measuring Internet access: (Re)examining the digital divide;
- (2) Seeking community and/or independence and/or anonymity;
- (3) “Everyone can raise their hands;”
- (4) Power, gender and online communication; and
- (5) Persisting, and succeeding, despite barriers.

Measuring Internet access: (Re)examining the digital divide.

One area where research findings are inconsistent is in examining whether online learning improves students' access to learning or whether technological barriers deny students access. Online learning is credited with expanding learning opportunities by increasing flexibility, meeting the needs of individual students, drawing on new resources and technology, motivating learners, building capacity in learners who may not have other ways to access education, and reducing barriers and making learning more accessible (Advisory Committee for Online Learning, 2001; Gouthro, 2004; Guillemet, 2005; Hodson, 2004; Kramarae & Wei, 2002; Treviranus & Coombs, 2000; Twigg, 2003). In this way, educators, educational institutions, policy makers and those who develop and market online learning technologies are among the many who are "prophesying that the advent of advanced ICTs [Information and Communications Technologies] will bring the solution to all our social ills" (Dholakia & Zwick, 2004, p. 131).

The digital divide is an image used to describe differences in access to digital communications (including the Internet) by identifying characteristics between those who have access to certain technologies and those who do not have access. The most basic definition of the phrase *digital divide* refers to the different degrees of access to Information and Communications Technologies (ICT)³, between different social groups within the same country or between countries.

Technology that is considered as part of ICT includes all types of audio and video

³ Statistics Canada (2008) provides the following definition of Information and Communications Technologies: "ICT includes technologies such as desktop and laptop computers, software, peripherals and connections to the Internet that are intended to fulfil information processing and communications functions."

communication technology, but in most cases, the digital divide is assumed to refer to the Internet and the hardware and software required to access it. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] (2001) offers the following definition for the digital divide: “the gap between individuals, households, business and geographic areas at different social-economic levels with regard to both their opportunities to access ICTs and their use of the Internet for a wide variety of activities” (p. 5). Similarly, Canadians’ Reddick, Boucher and Groseilliers (2000) define the digital divide as “the levels of awareness and use of these new technologies and services [that] are highly polarized along social class and generational lines” (p. 1).

Research about the digital divide affirms that gender is an important characteristic in predicting individuals’ access to Internet technology, which is a necessary component of online learning. While access to the Internet does not automatically result in use, it is a prerequisite. Most statistics describe Internet use and location of access (i.e. at home, at work, at school, at a public library, or at another location), without problematizing how it is used, which I discuss more later.

A decade ago, “the typical Internet user [was] overwhelmingly white, male, and well educated, with a higher than average income in a white-collar professional career” (Wolf, 1998, p. 17). Similarly, Gray (1999) stated that the “vast majority of Internet users [were] well educated, young, white males in first world countries” (p. 123). Other sources confirmed that in the United States, the following characteristics of the digital divide separated users from non-users:

“different levels of income and education, different racial and ethnic groups, old and young, single and dual-parent families, and those with and without disabilities” (United States of America - Department of Commerce, 2000, p. xvi). However, over time Internet use has been changing. The most recent American statistics show that gender is not a factor in Internet use; however, race, age, income level, education level, and community type (urban, suburban and rural) are factors in determining Internet use. When considering broadband or “high speed” and wireless Internet access and use, these characteristics, including gender, continue to be important (Rainie, 2010).⁴

Likewise, historically, Canadian statistics showed that age, educational level, income, gender, and language of communication all influence Internet use (Pastore, 2001; Statistics Canada, 2003). More recent Canadian statistics show that 73.2% of individuals in Canada use the Internet for personal reasons, and that men use the Internet slightly more than women (74.1% compared to 72.3%) (Statistics Canada, 2009). However, the level of use varies more substantially between groups based on age, education level, income level and geographic location (Statistics Canada, 2007a, 2009). ICT use also decreases among youth who are more distant from “the cultural ‘centre’ of White European culture” (Thiessen & Looker, 2008, p. 311).

It is important to remember that having access to technology does not

⁴ Broadband or high speed Internet access is often defined as “enabling at least a 256 Kbps advertised downlink Internet access” (Díaz-Pinés, 2009, p. 8). However, broadband access can have different thresholds in different countries. In Canada, “High-speed Internet access service includes speeds at or above 128 kilobits per second (Kbps)” and “Broadband service includes speeds at or above 1.5 Mbps” (Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), 2009, p. 213).

describe if and how it is actually being used (Vandenbroeck, Verschelden, & Boonaert, 2008). Internet access statistics are limited in their description of how long and how often, and for what purposes Internet users are online. They also fail to identify “*what kind of access*” users have; not acknowledging that users’ reliance on different types of technology or different Internet connections is an equally important detail: “a whole new social stratification seems to be emerging among Internet users themselves” (Bakardjieva, 2005, p. 97). Haythornthwaite (2007) identifies numerous studies that show that different groups of users have different skills, spend different amounts of time online and participate in different activities online. Similarly, Kramarae (2007) points out that many statistics present details about “*family income*” and “*family access to the Internet*” without specifying details about individuals in the family and computer use by different members of the family (2007, p. 173, italics in original). Closer examination of Canadian statistics clarifies that Internet users are defined as “individuals aged 16 years old and over who responded to have used the Internet for personal non-business purposes in the past 12 months from any location” (Statistics Canada, 2007a). However, even data about frequency of use (daily, weekly, monthly) (Statistics Canada, 2007b) and activity (Statistics Canada, 2007c) does not provide a clear picture of how individuals are using the Internet. Another challenge in interpreting Internet use statistics is that users may find it “particularly difficult [...] to do a quantification of the frequency of their use across the different types of activities” (Bakardjieva, 2005, p. 86).

In order to better understand the complex relationship between individual

and group characteristics and their computer use, Haythornthwaite (2007) encourages revisiting the language of the “digital divide” which suggests two distinct levels of digital access. Instead, she suggests a “spectrum of access” or differing degrees of “digital inclusion” (p. 99). Referencing the Commission of the European Communities (CEC), Haythornthwaite explores three different scenarios for how a digital divide may evolve: “digital divide is merely a temporary issue,” “digital divide is an issue of ever evolving delays” and “digital divide remains an issue of delay and exclusion” (CEC, 2005). She proposes that the divides based on gender and age will disappear with time. Other groups including those with low income, less education and some people from rural areas will continue to be behind and may never catch up.

Within online and distance learning programs, access to technology continues to be an issue. As technology continues to evolve, the risk exists that users with lower levels of “access, use, skill and competence” will be excluded from participation. Challenges in accessing e-learning will increase as learners search for programs from different countries where “hardware, software, and telecommunications infrastructures” may vary in quality and availability (Haythornthwaite, 2007, p. 99): “Every upgrade in equipment and telecommunications requirements, every change in technology, is an added barrier for economically disadvantaged e-learners” (Haythornthwaite, 2007, p. 113). Kirkup (2003) points out that the introduction of online technologies to courses offered by the Open University UK and FernUniversität in Germany led to an immediate decrease in the number of women enrolled in the courses. Even among

learners who are interested in learning online, additional supports may be required. For example, Vandebroek, Verschelden and Bonnaert (2008) found that age was an important characteristic in predicting computer use among female childcare providers in Belgium. However, they pointed out that the level of non-users was decreasing and that, with support, many non-users would be motivated to become computer users. Likewise, in a survey of Americans from high poverty areas and a sample from the general population, 11% of survey respondents had taken a course online, but more than two thirds were willing to consider taking courses online. More than half of respondents indicated they would need assistance to take a course online, with those who had not completed secondary or post-secondary education being most likely to state they would need assistance (Mossberger, Tolbert, & Stansbury, 2003).

Furthermore, the costs of equipment and access challenge the assertion that online learning is accessible to everyone:

Where e-learning is billed as a means to provide education anywhere, anytime, it does not mean everyone. E-Learning – in its distributed, ‘owner-operated’ form (i.e., the learner is responsible for the equipment) – is yet another means for the elite to reap further benefit from being part of the elite (in this case in the form of education). (Haythornthwaite, 2007, p. 112)

Similarly, in an American study, “Interest in online education was statistically more likely among the educated, the young, the affluent, and the employed” (Mossberger, et al., 2003, p. 77), and those who were most likely to have taken

online courses were “young, better educated, and employed” and “African-American” (Mossberger, et al., 2003, p. 79). The higher level of participation by African-American people may be because of the positive attitude towards Internet technology and the perception of the value of Internet technology, which is particularly high among African-American respondents despite their being less likely to have Internet access (Mossberger, Tolbert, & Gilbert, 2006). Similarly, Kramarae and Wei (2002) point out that both in the United States and in Africa the cost of online learning is at least equal to that of on-campus tuition making online learning inaccessible to some learners due to the combined costs of equipment, Internet access and tuition.

With technology facilitating global communications, online learners have access to educational programs offered by institutions outside of their countries. This access can lead to students having access to educational curricula developed by English-language institutions in Europe and North America that is not reflective of local values, knowledge and needs. In a desire to seek a “world class” (Kramarae & Wei, 2002, p. 245) education, local institutions may be perceived as offering lower quality education. This perception is particularly risky for women whose knowledge tends to be “closely associated with experiential, local, ecological knowledge” (Kramarae & Wei, 2002, p. 246).

In addition to the digital divide, which excludes some learners based on their *access* to online technology like the Internet, some women face challenges even when they supposedly have access to the Internet because of their lack of access to a computer at home, a lack of experience with technology and/or a lack

of confidence in using technology (Taylor, Kramarae, & Ebben, 1993 as cited in Burge, 1998; J. Cooper, 2006; Gunn, et al., 2003).

Female learners face ongoing challenges with technology as they take their courses. Women tend to have more difficulties accessing shared family computers (Kirkup & Abbot, 1997 as cited by Gunn, et al., 2003; von Prümmer, 2004). Women in May's (1994) study "appeared to consider technical difficulties as inevitable and as nuisance factors only" (Dis/comfort with Teleconferencing section, para. 11). These technology challenges can effect women's completion of online programs (Müller, 2008).

There are several reasons women may feel excluded in online environments including differing communication styles (Crowston & Kammerer, 1998; Wakeford, 1999), different conceptions of what counts as knowledge (Spender, 1995), an environment that is hostile towards women (Shade, 2002; Wakeford, 1999; Wolf, 1998), lack of time due to work and family responsibilities (Wolf, 1998), how computers are used in schools (Kramarae, 2007), and the financial costs of setting up and maintaining Internet access (Haythornthwaite, 2007, p. 112; Wolf, 1998). Furthermore, Marcelle (2006) points out that gender equality is not a priority in the field of information technology. She offers three reasons for this limited attention: (1) technology is perceived as being gender neutral; (2) the promotion of gender equality would disrupt the current power structures where most positions of decision making are held by men, and is not advantageous to men or women in positions of power; and (3) at this point, gender equality in information technology fields is not a priority

for feminists. Marcelle calls for feminist organizations to examine the politics of access to information technology rather than relying on capitalist theories of the market to resolve the digital divide over time.

Seeking community and/or independence and/or anonymity.

Online learning usually requires learners to work independently, with some group assignments, and opportunities for synchronous and asynchronous text, voice and video communication. In some programs, learners also have opportunities for face-to-face meetings prior to or during the program. Depending on the course design, learners may experience tensions between their desire and need for independent and/or social learning, and their interest in anonymity.

While distance learning had limited opportunities for interaction, online learning relies on communication and interaction: it is “a collaborative-constructivist learning experience within a community of inquiry. This is a sharp departure from theories of distance education that idealize student independence” (Garrison & Archer, 2007, p. 78).

Seeking community and connection.

While women often choose online learning because of its flexibility, which allows them to address pragmatic issues, Kirkup and von Prümmer’s (1990) work confirms that women in distance learning settings also seek connections with other learners. Women learning at a distance through the Open University (UK) and the FernUniversität (Germany) were more likely to visit local study centres for optional tutorials, although they faced more challenges than men in accessing the centres due to transportation and safety concerns.

Women were more motivated than men to attend in order to meet other learners, while men were more likely to not attend because they wanted to work independently or they did not want to be involved in group activities (Kirkup & von Prümmer, 1990). These researchers also found that women were more likely to find opportunities to discuss their studies with other people than men were; however, Kirkup and von Prümmer suggest this difference is due to women's desire to be engaged learners who learn from interactions rather than as a reaction to feeling isolated.

Rovai and Baker (2005) offer a different perspective on community with their study of 281 university level students who were over 80% female. They used an online survey to gather information about students' sense of community and their perceptions of their own learning. They found that women felt a stronger sense of community and they felt they learned more in online learning settings than their male classmates. One explanation for these responses is that the women posted more frequently in the online class, which would lead them to be more involved in the community and more active in their learning.

Gouthro (2004) also found that working together and developing relationships allowed women in distance learning courses to create a sense of community, while Müller (2008) found that support from both classmates and faculty were important to online learners. Female professors teaching online also valued the flexible environment which allowed them to use collaborative teaching and learning styles that were consistent with feminist pedagogy (Selfe & Hawisher, 2003).

Seeking independence.

Kramarae's research (2001), on the other hand, suggests that many female learners prefer the independent study components of online learning because it is their best way of learning, though they enjoy having a discussion component after they have studied the material themselves. Some women also preferred independent study because it allows them more flexibility and because it ensures their grades are based on their own work. While many women indicated they preferred a combination of individual and group activities, some women indicated they "loathe group work" (Kramarae, 2001, p. 18), although they may enjoy group discussions. Kramarae acknowledges that some of her results could be biased in favour of learners who prefer online learning since her research included an online survey. Likewise Cragg et al. (2005) found that women appreciated the opportunity to interact with their classmates, but they did not want to be required to complete group assignments.

Seeking anonymity.

Sullivan's (2002) research affirms that women may not always choose online learning for a sense of community. He found that among the female college students in his study, the "anonymous, asynchronous nature of the online classroom environment" was valued by women (p. 141). Female students generally liked the online environment and identified the anonymity of the setting as one of its most important features. Similarly, Fisher et al. (2008) theorize that younger women, who are less likely to be balancing family and work with school responsibility, choose online learning because it reduces the risk of intrasexual

competition, it increases anonymity, which reduces the risk of aggression, and the absence of physical observation reduces the risk of being judged on appearance.

Caspi, Chajut and Saporta (2008) found that women enrolled in the Open University of Israel participate proportionately more than men in online discussions, while men participated proportionately more in face-to-face tutorials. They offer two possible explanations: women prefer written communication to oral communication, or women prefer written communication more than men do. However, they stated that more research is required to establish why women participated more.

“Everyone can raise their hands.”

One major area of research about women and online learning relates to their participation levels in online discussions. This research highlights a number of tensions related to the difference between the opportunities to participate online as compared to the actual rates of participation for female students. As the quote above, “everyone can raise their hands” (Bradley, 1998, para. 4), suggests, some researchers argue that online learning creates opportunities for all learners to participate because there are no visual cues to differentiate learners’ relative status and because the context allows everyone the opportunity to participate (Poole, 2000 & Schleiter, 1996 as cited in D. M. Anderson & Haddad, 2005; Herring, 1996). However, actual participation levels and forms of participation vary by gender.

Some research about levels of participation in synchronous and asynchronous online discussions indicate that women express themselves less

frequently than their male classmates (Kramarae, 2001; Kramarae & Taylor, 1993; Wolfe, 2000). Earlier research about distance learning found that not everyone has the same opportunity to participate in teleconferencing sessions because some students talk too much, or because the instructor is the central speaker in the discussion (May, 1994). More recent research about participation rates in online learning finds that, typically, male students are more likely to dominate online discussions by controlling discussion topics (Kramarae, 2001) while female students are more likely to participate in moderated or facilitated discussions (Herring, 2004; Korenman & Wyatt, 1996). In addition to the studies showing that women feel threatened by dominant masculine forms of communication online (Wakeford, 1999), research indicates that those students who were unlikely to participate in face-to-face discussions are also unlikely to participate in online settings (Mason, 1991 as cited in Light & Light, 1999). In particular, female electronic mailing list participants are less likely to receive responses to their posts and are more likely to be actively discouraged from participating (in this case by threats of members to unsubscribe from the list), which led to decreased participation (Herring, 1996). Furthermore, some learners choose to remain silent in some situations as a coping strategy (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996; Ross-Gordon & Brown-Haywood, 2000 both as cited in Kramarae, 2001), or when they are unfamiliar with the social setting, or to show respect (Kramarae, 2001).

Culture also plays a role in participation intersecting with gender to produce more complex issues. For example, sometimes cultural expectations

teach learners to consider ideas in their heads and to communicate those ideas only when necessary (Cheng, 1999). Similarly, female Chinese graduate students studying at a Canadian university found that Chinese cultural understanding of education prevented them from asking questions in online courses and discouraged them from posting messages that were not directly related to the discussion topic (Zhao & McDougall, 2008). In another example, Gouthro (2004) found that Jamaican women and Canadian women had different expectations of participation. When asked about equality in their courses, Jamaican women were concerned that the men in their courses might not be participating enough. The power relationships that had developed in this Caribbean and colonized country created different expectations of the female learners.

In another example, Wolfe (2000) found that participation levels were highest for white males, followed by Hispanic females, Hispanic males and white females in the face-to-face classroom; however, in the computer-mediated setting, white males and females participated equally followed by Hispanic males and then Hispanic females. These observations were consistent with the students' own assessments of their relative participation in each environment.

In another study, Wolfe (1999) identified seven types of interactions in an online discussion setting: "open and direct questions, answers, oppositions, long and short agreements, and tangents" (p. 155). In her analysis of synchronous discussions among undergraduate students, she found that men and women posted approximately the same number of times, but that men's postings were longer; both men and women initiated the same number of interactions and they received

the same number of responses; women asked more open-ended questions than men while men received more direct questions than women; both men and women's questions were answered with the same frequency; women were more likely to post short and long agreement statements than men, while men were more likely to respond with tangential statements; and women posted fewer responses to oppositional comments and to agreements (Wolfe, 1999).

Schleiter (1996) found that participating in an online computer conference, as part of a face-to-face class "increase[d] [African-American women's] participation in and connectedness to the class" (p. 16). European women participated actively in both the online and the classroom discussions. Participation rates, both online and in class, were lowest for African-Americans and participation rates for European men were higher in face-to-face classes than online. Schleiter claims that the online discussions "opened lines of communication, integrating students into the class" (p. 17).

Power, gender and online communication.

Another area where tensions occur in online learning research is around the question of whether the online environment increases equality by eliminating visual cues about identity or whether existing social structures continue to shape online dynamics.

Studies of women's communication styles in online settings, not necessarily in educational contexts, claim that different communication styles often make it possible to distinguish between male and female participants (see Herring, 2004 for a summary of articles on this topic). For example, women are

more often associated with polite behaviour while men tend to be more abrupt (Herring, 2004; Kramarae, 2001). Most of the studies about online communication consider how gender influences learners' interactions; however, it may also be important to examine how learners' interactions with instructors are influenced by gender (Kramarae, 2001).

Other research shows gender does not have an impact on "discourse style and participation" (Wang, et al., 2003, p. 59). This research claims that there are no concerns with power relationships in online learning because all participants have the opportunity to "speak" or post. These authors claim that speaking (or posting in an online classroom) indicates a student is empowered. In other words, if everyone is speaking or participating, then no one is being marginalized. Wolfe (2000), however, questions this assertion, and she argues that more research is needed to determine whether speaking really means being empowered. In addition, her research challenges the assumption that the further a student is from the white, male student the less likely he or she is to participate (i.e. Hispanic women are twice removed because of gender and race). Her research affirms that the intersections of gender and race are important characteristics in understanding participation rates.

Furthermore, Wolfe (1999) hypothesizes that women value support so they are more likely to post agreements while men are more likely to post tangential comments, which use the previous posts as a starting point for their own opinions and move the discussion forward according to their interests. She also theorizes that women are less likely to respond to a posting that is in

agreement with their early comments because of modesty: “the tone of the comments strongly suggests that women view agreements as necessary group work and men are more inclined to view them as bolstering an individual’s status” (Wolfe, 1999, p. 163). Wolfe hypothesizes that women’s lack of responses to challenges of their ideas is also due to modesty; the women do not want to appear too confident or overzealous in their critique of other students’ perspectives. She disagrees with the possible hypothesis that women do not respond to challenges because they lack self-confidence.

The reasons for the gendered difference in participation can be a function of the online setting. For example, instructional design is usually based on a “male, patriarchal communication paradigm that focuses on data and rationality rather than relationships” (Burgess, 2009, p. 63).

However, some reasons for participation are not unique to the online environment. Online settings perpetuate the communication and social patterns of traditional, face-to-face learning: “the Internet does not introduce totally new ethnic dynamics, but rather magnifies those that already exist” (Warschauer, 2000, p. 167). Similarly, Herring (2004) points out that gender differences exist in asynchronous communication settings where participants come from already gendered systems like academic and professional settings, and where they are more likely to have off-line relationships. Furthermore, Fisher, Cox and Gray (2008) point out that online learning environments maintain many of the characteristics of face-to-face learning environments: “simply moving a learning community online does not mean that it automatically becomes democratic, less

aggressive, or free of problems that plague traditional classrooms” (Conclusion section, para. 1).

Likewise, Anderson (2006) states that offline characteristics continue to influence online interactions; these online spaces are political spaces. He shows that students have power in online contexts because they have the capacity to make decisions about their level and type of participation. However, students also pointed out that just because everyone had the option to participate in the discussion did not mean that it was an “open” discussion (p. 116). These mostly female students would assess their own posts and try to predict how they would be received by the group, which resulted in “self-censorship” (p. 117). Students also prepared their posts to satisfy course requirements and based on their assessment of the instructor’s expectation about content and style. Student level of participation was also influenced by other responsibilities in their lives, which limited the amount of time they had to participate in online discussions, by technological issues, which interfered with participation, and by the permanence and visibility of their messages (also see T. L. Thompson, et al., 2007).

Online environments can also be a source of power for learners. Schleiter (1996) found that participating in an online computer conference, as part of a face-to-face class “increase[d] [African-American women’s] participation in and connectedness to the class” (p. 16) and allowed them to shape the class through their involvement in the online discussion while their participation in the classroom remained low. The online discussions, shaped by these women, led to the instructor making changes in the class structure, policy and scheduling.

Similarly, Gouthro (2004) found that women were able to develop a “power within” themselves as individuals and as a community through their involvement in distance learning courses (p. 454).

Persisting, and succeeding, despite barriers.

Another area of tension around online learning involves understanding what works best for individual learners and what works best for institutions. Offering courses online requires addressing numerous policy issues which impact both learners and educators (Varvel, et al., 2007; L. Wallace, 2007). Developing and implementing policies related to online learning highlights how the needs of learners and institutions are not always compatible.

Grace’s (1994) research with men and women studying at a distance in Australia found that gender was the “strongest single factor affecting cultural distance between personal context and institutional culture” (p. 14). She explains:

not only had factors such as the gendered social construction of parenthood and of the labour market combined to mitigate against the women’s inclusion in the culture of higher education, but these women were also confronting internalized cultural norms and attitudes which tended to instil doubts about their rights and eligibility to participate in that culture. (p. 14)

Women faced ongoing role conflict, which prompted women to keep their academic experiences to themselves or to use the academic setting as an escape (p. 20). Likewise, Gouthro (2009) explains that private concerns influencing women’s learning, such as funding, childcare, accessibility, are not given

attention by institutions because they are considered by the institution to be private, individual concerns that are not important to learning.

Von Prümmer (1994) also looks at institutional fit to explain why so few women enroll in and complete courses through FernUniversität in Germany. She identified the choice of subject matter, the independent study format and the predominance of male faculty and tutors as factors that discourage women. She also pointed out that women's personal lives contributed to their limited enrollment because many women have household, family and work responsibilities; their domestic and childcare responsibilities make scheduling time and finding space for school work difficult; and they do not always have the necessary social and academic support. Von Prümmer's pilot project focused on creating a "women-friendly perspective in distance education" (p. 10) for mothers returning to school while caring for children and household responsibilities. The program involved partnering with "mother's centres" to provide practical support (childcare and meals) for women while the institution offered academic and social support through study groups and tutors/counsellors who provided academic support and facilitated study group interactions. The women not only benefited academically, but they also became more confident and better able to assert themselves in their relationships with the academic institution and with their families in order to get the space and time necessary for their studies.

Institutional policies require significant attention as a result of increased e-learning enrolment. Varvel, Montague and Estabrook (2007) point out that distance learning students who are taking some or all of their courses off campus,

often on a part-time basis, may need access to certain services (financial aid, academic support services and library resources) while they do not want to be required to pay for other services they cannot access (fitness centres and health services). Furst-Bowe and Dittmann (2001) also found that distance learning students felt institutions were focused on providing services for traditional, on-campus students rather than distance learners.

Despite these many barriers, women participate in and are successful in online learning courses, suggesting that they do find ways to overcome these challenges (Cragg, et al., 2005; Gunn, et al., 2003; Müller, 2008). Based on a survey of students at Midwestern university, Anderson and Haddad (2005) found that “females experience deeper perceived learning in online than in face-to-face courses” (p. 11) possibly because they feel more comfortable expressing themselves in this setting and because they ask for, and receive more support from the instructor than in face-to-face settings. Similarly, in a case study of students in an undergraduate IT course, despite facing more challenges in accessing a computer for the course, lower levels of confidence, taking longer to complete assignments, and accessing fewer sources of assistance, women received higher grades than men except on the technical assignment of web page design (Gunn, et al., 2003). Similarly, in a study of undergraduate students in a web design course in New Zealand, women and mature students tended to get higher grades in online courses than younger male students. They also accessed course materials more times and participated more than male students. Possible explanations for these differences are that male students are overconfident so they feel they do not need

to work as hard, while female students feel less confident and work harder, or that female students are more self-directed so they do better than male students in the online setting where there are fewer structures to ensure that learners complete assignments. These results are supported by the work of Conole (2001 as cited in Gunn, et al., 2003) who also found female students accessed the course site more times and posted more messages than male students. They also, to a degree, affirm Kramarae's (2001) finding that online learning may be well suited to "older, more mature students or non-traditional age students" (p. 20).

Price (2006) also found that women enrolled in online courses were more likely to complete online courses and more likely to pass them than their male classmates. Interestingly, students learning online in this study (both male and female) were "less academically engaged" than students who were not learning online, though women learning online were more engaged than men learning online. All the online students reported less positive levels of interaction with their tutors. However, the women learning online were both more self-confident and more willing to learn from their classmates than the men learning online, and than the women learning in a face-to-face course.

Women persist despite barriers: "Many of the women were highly focused on achieving their degrees and were willing to overlook or work around all kinds of environmental barriers. Others seemed to view the situation as a compromise" (Furst-Bowe & Dittmann, 2001, p. 410). Likewise, Müller (2008) found that although women preferred to learn in a face-to-face setting, it was not as

important a barrier as other factors that prevent women from completing their programs.

Tensions in Learners' Experiences

Another way of looking at the literature is to examine what it says about the tensions that women experience while they are learning online. Learners are pulled in different direction as they navigate their online educational experiences. It quickly becomes clear that online learners are continually negotiating a number of concurrent tensions within their personal learning contexts.

Women's reasons for enrolling in online courses often involve negotiating within tensions including

- (1) pursuing personal and professional goals while considering the needs of their partners and families;
- (2) balancing education and household, family, childcare, and work responsibilities;
- (3) weighing both pragmatic issues and social needs;
- (4) melding academic goals with action on social issues;
- (5) developing strategies for success;
- (6) blurring boundaries; and
- (6) making decisions about computers.

Pursuing personal and professional goals while considering the needs of partners and families.

Women's decisions to pursue online learning often reflect their attempts to address their own academic and career goals while addressing the needs of their

partners and families. For example, von Prümmer (1994) identifies two main reasons why German women choose to enroll in distance education programs: first, they have traditionally had to choose educational institutions based on where their husbands or families live, so distance education allows them more flexibility when there are limited educational options in their communities or when they would otherwise have to relocate; and second, they appreciate the flexibility in scheduling study time which allows them to fit studying in between their other household, family and work responsibilities (p. 4). In this way, women can use online learning to give them the flexibility to pursue educational opportunities while still being available to support their spouses and families. This desire to maintain their place in the home and their roles as mothers and wives is not unique to online learners, but is shared by other female adult learners: “identity within the homeplace has gendered connotations since women are usually expected to prioritize their identities as wives/partners, and particularly as mothers, regardless of other aspects of their identity (i.e., welder, nurse, politician)” (Gouthro, 2009, p. 164).

Furthermore, women who are learning online are often aware of, and attentive to, the impact their studies have on their families. They consciously choose “programs that minimize family disruptions, selecting part-time, distance, or compressed study options” (Gouthro, 2009, p. 165). Online learning is one option that allows them to pursue their education with less of an impact on the lives of their spouses and children. For example, some women face a lack of support for their educational involvement from their families (Kramarae, 2001).

They report feeling guilty about doing their schoolwork because it takes them away from other responsibilities. Cragg et al (2005) found that “42% ($n=196$) agreed or strongly agreed that their spousal/partner relationship had been negatively affected by their studies; 38% ($n=129$) agreed or strongly agreed that their spouse resented the time they spent on their studies” (p. 30). While certainly not the norm, in more extreme cases, some men are not supportive of their wives’ educational needs for quiet study space, and in some cases have even “hidden or damaged their study materials and assignments” (Faith, 1998, p. 11).

As a result of the desire to pursue their educational and professional goals, while also feeling responsible for the impact of their decisions on their spouse and/or family, women “experience physical and emotional pushes and pulls when balancing demands on their time and energy” (Cragg, et al., 2005, p. 35). Many women report feeling guilty about their learning and the impact it has on their family (Cragg, et al., 2005; von Prümmer, 2000). Learning at a distance can be “invisible to others and difficult to explain” (Cragg, et al., 2005, p. 35), which, combined with their feelings of guilt, prevents some women from asking for help and may lead them to hide their school-related work, whether they are learning online or face-to-face (Gouthro, 2004; Campbell 1999/2000 as cited in Kramarae, 2001; Maynard & Pearsall, 1994; Stalker, 1997). Some women may even feel they need to do additional housework to compensate for the time they take to do schoolwork (Campbell 1999/2000 as cited in Kramarae, 2001). These approaches suggest that women may choose online learning because it gives them the most

flexibility to fit learning in to their lives in ways that are less of an inconvenience to others, yet they do not necessarily feel comfortable with their decisions.

Balancing education and household, family, and work responsibilities.

Women learning online are often occupying multiple social roles including working full-time and caring for families (Cragg et al., 2005), which was also the case with women taking distance education courses (Faith, 1988; M. M. Thompson, 1998). In fact, Cragg et al. found that most women in their study had five or more roles in addition to the role of student. One reason for choosing online learning is that it affords learners the flexibility in scheduling their schoolwork around other responsibilities (Faith, 1988; Furst-Bowe, 2002; May, 1994; von Prümmer, 1994). In fact, online learning is actually advertized as a way for women to balance education with their work and family responsibilities (Kramarae, 2001; Müller, 2008). For example, DeVry Institute of Technology (DeVry Calgary, 2010) shows a picture of a woman with a young child looking at laptop together in its ad for online courses. Other institutions offer testimonials from women including mothers who are also students. Thompson Rivers University (2010) has six out of eight testimonials from women, while Athabasca University (2010c) has seven out of twelve student stories from women (though this page does include a photo of a man with a child). Interestingly, the home computer is also advertised in a similar fashion – advertisements show “the computer’s role in the working mother’s balancing act, offering inspirational portraits of women who successfully juggled jobs and childrearing with the computer’s help” (Cassidy, 2001, p. 52).

Regardless of the hype about online learning as a way to balance multiple roles and responsibilities, learners need to find ways to accommodate their responsibilities at home, work and school, which can be challenging (Gunn, et al., 2003; Müller, 2008). For example, Thompson (1998) found that women who work outside the home are less successful in distance learning situations. Yet, in many cases professional or career development motivate women to learn (Cragg, et al., 2005; Furst-Bowe, 2002), and their desire for flexibility prompts them to choose online learning (Furst-Bowe, 2002).

The actual process of completing online learning courses requires making decisions about time and priorities. In order to complete school work, both male and female learners in Kazmer and Haythornthwaite's (2001) study of students in an online Master's degree program were willing to give up some or all of the following: personal and social leisure activities, volunteer work, classes, paid work, sleep, eating, family (but not children), and expectations for marks. Similarly, Cragg et al. (2005) also found that women "[put] their lives on hold" (p. 31) while studying by limiting interactions with friends and extended family.

The process of balancing commitments can also be observed in how and when women schedule their schoolwork. In a case study of students in an undergraduate IT course, while all students appreciated the flexibility of the online learning environment, female students found it more challenging to access a computer for the course, often because they did not have a computer at home or because they had to share it with others. These students completed their work later at night than male students, often because their schoolwork was not considered a

priority within the home (French & Richardson, 2005), a finding echoed by other studies (Gunn, et al., 2003; Kramarae, 2001). In order to fit distance education in to their lives, the women in May's (1994) study used the following scheduling strategies: "some women set rigid schedules for themselves, while others described themselves as scattered, as buckling down in spurts, or as 'leaving it all to the end'" depending on their other family commitments (Planning a Study Schedule section, para. 1). Women indicated men would not face the same challenges in scheduling and balancing responsibilities: they claimed that "distance learning was 'easier for a man'" (Conclusions section, para. 2).

Weighing both pragmatic issues and social needs.

Studies are mixed when it comes to identifying whether women prefer online learning or whether pragmatic reasons determine their choices. For some women, pragmatic reasons are more important than social needs when choosing delivery methods; despite a preference for face-to-face learning some learners, both male and female, will choose online learning to avoid long commutes (Card & Horton, 2000). Likewise, women often cite convenience as a reason for choosing online learning. In a major study of women learning online in the United States, Kramarae (2001) conducted interviews, focus groups and an online survey of men and women, who were learners, administrators, educators, and potential students. The women in this study stated that they chose to enroll in online learning for "pragmatic reasons involving their current work and family situations," while "a much smaller number explain[ed] that they actually prefer[red] the online learning experience itself" (p. 11). Women in Kramarae's

(2001) study also cited flexibility, self-paced learning, less need to commute, lower costs for transportation and child care, and physical disabilities as reasons for choosing online learning. Similarly, May's (1994) study of women enrolled in Athabasca University's distance education women's studies courses affirms that accessibility and the opportunity to study without travelling to larger cities are reasons women choose distance learning.

Some women value social interaction, which influences their educational choices. Kirkup and von Prümmer's (1990) found that women are more likely than men to travel long distances and overcome transportation challenges in order to attend tutoring sessions. Wolfe (2000) found that race influences women's preferences about taking online courses. White female students enrolled in undergraduate-level English courses were the most likely to indicate they preferred the computer-mediated communication (CMC) environment and their participation increased in this context. Hispanic women, on the other hand, preferred the face-to-face setting because of "the presence of nonverbal discourse cues" (Wolfe, pp. 510-511). The white women commented that "freedom from turn-taking rules" was one of the reasons they preferred the CMC environment (p. 509).

The decision to enroll in online learning may reflect the tension between pragmatic concerns and learners' personal preferences. As Haythornthwaite (2007) points out, "In general, it is assumed that e-learning is an *optional form of education*, and hence that there is an alternative which does not require expensive equipment and infrastructure" (pp. 114-115 italics added). However, the

experiences of women often point to online learning being their only option; when barriers prevent learners from attending traditional courses, some learners accept distance education courses, but only as a less appealing option (Perraton, 2000), a “compromise” (Kramarae, 2001, p. 29) or a “last resort” (Kramarae, 2001, p. 15). Women who choose traditional classrooms do so for social reasons, to have more structure in their learning, to respond to personal preferences, and to have direct contact with the instructor (Kramarae, 2001).

Melding academic goals with action on social issues.

Some women learning online also find tensions between their academic goals and the focus of the institutional curriculum. Some women find it challenging to consider “the possibility of learning in isolation” (Gunn, et al., 2003, p. 23). Not only does isolation mean that women are not able to learn in communities, which they may prefer, it also means that some learners are isolated from learning opportunities and experiences. For example, participating in distance education can keep women isolated at home rather than allowing them to travel to a university campus and have the experiences associated with that environment (Brown & Duguid, 2000; May, 1994). Likewise, teaching online can be isolating for professors (Selfe & Hawisher, 2003). As Faith (1988) explains the “high level of enrolment by women in many home study programmes world-wide in part reflects the still-prevalent assumption that a women’s place is in the home” (p. 6). Bakardjieva (2005) claims that this isolation is not necessarily a bad thing. Some people seek online interaction in response to “social isolation brought about by circumstances such as illness, dysfunctional marriage, single parenthood,

retirement, unemployment” (p. 118). In these situations, Internet access “can also *associate*, or connect the home with the public worlds of citizenship and community in new ways by giving these worlds a new symbolic visibility and accessibility” (p. 71, italics in original).

Feminist educators and others who seek to address inequality, may see online learning as an opportunity to reach learners who may otherwise not be able to access learning including women, learners with disabilities, older learners, and learners in isolated communities (Kramarae, 2001). Likewise, post-secondary institutions offering online programs may promote themselves as accessible to a diverse population who may not be able to attend traditional programs because “where you live or work, or your commitments to careers or families...[by] remov[ing] the barriers of time, space, past educational experience, and, to a great degree, level of income” (Athabasca University, 2010b, Meeting the Challenges of Your Future section, para. 2). When feminist educators work with online learning tools to match pedagogy and content to address issues of access and equality, there is potential for online learning to help learners to challenge power structures in their lives and communities. In this way, learning online can enable agency in women. Learners can be introduced to new ideas and experiences (Kramarae, 2001). Women learning online also report both feeling challenged academically and experiencing personal growth (Müller, 2008). Women who have used computers at home have reconsidered their roles within their families (Burke, 2001), developed skills they were then able to share with other women (Bakardjieva, 2005), and formed virtual communities as “e-spaces that would be

enabling for dialogue and cooperation” (Gajjala, 2004, p. 69). In learning contexts, online interactions led learners to request changes in the course structure and content to address their needs (Schleiter, 1996). Distance and online learning have also been used to support democracy and personal development among women in Mauritius (Gokool-Ramdoo, 2005) and address issues of unemployment among women in rural Greece (Perivoliotis-Chryssovergis, 2006).

However, not all online learning necessarily creates the emancipatory experiences women seek. Giddens (1991) states, distance education “[holds] out the possibility of emancipation, [since] modern institutions create mechanisms of suppression, rather than actualisation of self” (Giddens, 1991 as cited in Tait, 1994, p. 34). Similarly, Arger (1990) claims women show dissatisfaction with distance education and its failure to meet their expectations of increasing equality. In much the same way, women in May’s (1994) study found that there was limited opportunity for critical perspectives due to the pre-packaged nature of the distance education course material; however, some tutors helped the students to look at the material critically. The women in May’s study did not see distance learning as flexible. Rather, they found that there was limited opportunity for interaction and the primary means of study was independent study of text-based materials. Even when there was the opportunity for more personal contact through telephone tutorials and teleconferencing, the students found the interaction still lacked the personal aspect of face-to-face communication. Similarly, Kramarae (2007) points out that many distance learners are “non-traditional students” whose voices may already be absent from most textbooks. Finding connections between

learners lives and the course content may be particularly challenging for distance learners: “Many working-class women are participating in adult education and are questioning and challenging their traditional roles and status in society. Their education can only be liberating if it is linked to their experiences and knowledge” (Kramarae, 2007, p. 176).

In contrast, Von Prümmer’s (1994) pilot project for creating a “women-friendly perspective in distance education” (p. 10) showed how distance education could benefit learners with learning that extends beyond the prescribed course content. Participants in this program had access to childcare support, and access to tutors and academic counsellors and study groups for academic support. As a result of their participation, the women not only worked towards their academic goals, but they also gained confidence and improved their communication skills, which helped in interactions with the institution and their families.

Developing strategies for success.

Researchers have looked at the personal traits and study skills necessary for succeeding in online learning courses. May (1994) found that her participants “unanimously agreed that distance education ‘isn’t for everyone.’ Because distance study requires a considerable degree of learner self-determination and self-motivation, the women contended that it was best suited to self-starters” (Conclusions section, para. 3). Likewise, the participants in Kramarae’s (2001) study of women learning online identified the following characteristics that are required for success in an online learning setting: “motivation, time-management skills, maturity, and, according to a small number of women, the ability to work

late at night or early in the morning” (p. 19). They also identified independent study skills, computer skills and ambition as important for completing online courses. Women use different scheduling strategies to complete their course work (May, 1994), perhaps because they take more time to complete assignments (Gunn, et al., 2003). Similarly, Furst-Bowe and Dittmann (2001) found that learners felt distance education was “very time consuming” and that they had to be “more self-directed, more motivated and extend more effort” to study at a distance (p. 410). In some cases, women are unable to approach their course work in the way they would like. Because of feeling pressured for time, Burge (1998) states the style of online courses may “drive [women] into inappropriate academic street-smarts (e.g., ‘anything to get my degree’)” (p. 32).

One of the keys to success identified by women learning online is support. Women identified their spouses/partners, tutors/instructors, and children as the most important sources of support for their learning (Cragg, et al., 2005). In terms of actual support received, spouse/partners, children and immediate work supervisors were rated the highest, while sources that did not provide much support included university administration and fellow students (Cragg, et al., 2005). Furst-Bowe and Dittmann (2001) found that support from instructors was important for students evaluating the quality of their online experiences, and that lack of communication with instructors was a concern for students, and discouraged students from completing courses. Likewise, Müller (2008) found that faculty support was valued by online learners.

Social interaction with classmates is valued more by some students than others, and that interaction may be academic or social in nature (Cragg, et al., 2005; Furst-Bowe & Dittmann, 2001). Some women found the support they needed through face-to-face meetings during summer residency programs (Müller, 2008).

Blurring of boundaries.

Internet users, including women learning, online identify blurring of boundaries as a tension. Dichotomies like public and private sphere, online and offline, and public and private interactions are continually shifting as women negotiate within their online learning environments. For example, some critical theorists conceptualize women's experiences as being divided between the public and private spheres (Gouthro, 2009; Wischermann, 2004). They acknowledge that the division between public and private is not always definite: "Critical feminists not only point out the blurred boundaries of public/private spheres, but also the contested spaces within 'public' or 'private' realms" (Gouthro, 2009, p. 163). The introduction of online technology appears to blur the boundaries between public and private. For example, Bakardjieva (2005) identified how one motivation for getting the Internet at home was "blending work/education space with that of the home" (p. 96). Likewise, there is a continual blur of the boundaries between online and offline experiences.

The coexistence of online and offline experiences and interactions prevents them from being examined in isolation. Offline activities influence online interactions and vice versa. Attempting to separate their lives into online

and offline only creates a “false dichotomy’ of on/offline” (McGerty, 2003, p. 338). Similarly, in online contexts, no clear boundaries separate what is public and what is private information. Instead, Internet users are continually evaluating what to share:

what this public-private-intimate continuum helps us realize is that [...] there is no critical point where a person’s or a group’s behaviour can be definitively characterized as private as opposed to public and vice versa. People plan and experience their social action as combining privacy and publicness in different proportions. (Bakardjieva, 2005, p. 185)

Computers: Access, location, and decision-making.

In much the same way as the introduction of the television within the home reflected cultural and familial understandings on the role of the television in the home (Spigel, 1992), the physical location and significance of a computer must be negotiated within each family and home: “this regulation involves making decisions about issues of placement, access, preferred, discouraged and forbidden activities on and through the Internet, and the allocation of resources including time, space, money and attention” (Bakardjieva, 2005, p. 138).

Based on an analysis of magazine articles and advertisements, Cassidy (2001) argues that in the early 1990s the computer was being promoted based on “its value in women’s work – both income-producing and family-centered” (p. 45), much like had occurred with television (Spigel, 1992). During this time, the computer was presented as a tool for women: advertisements were “extolling the computer’s utopian potential to help a woman produce income, manage her

household, and provide educational advantages to her children, all at once” (Cassidy, 2001, p. 48).

In some cases, the placement and uses of the computer emphasize the gendered nature of space within the home. Cassidy (2001) points out that the increasing popularity of computers and their applications for men and women made it more difficult to locate them within the home with its gendered spaces. This was increasingly problematic as the “postfeminist home PC” (p. 47) necessitated placement where women could access it. Issues of privacy and accessibility arose as solutions were sought for the problem of how women could integrate computers into their other family and household responsibilities. In many cases, computers are shared between family members so they are usually in a location where different family members have access. However, location can also determine use. Adults in Frohlich, Dray and Silverman’s (2003) study felt that different computer tasks should be completed in different locations: “they want to do ‘serious’ PC stuff in a private office area, and to perform more ‘casual’ PC activities selectively in other parts of the house, such as the living room and kitchen” (p. 316).

In families with multiple computer users sharing one, or more, computers, the process of scheduling computer use among different family members highlighted the perceived importance of different online activities by different users. Within a family, a shared computer was used for different activities by different family members. According to Frohlich, Dray and Silverman (2003) mothers primarily used the computer to communicate, while fathers used it for

work and children used it for fun. Mothers were the family members who were most likely to be using the computer for learning (children's use of the computer for homework was a separate category). The scheduling of computer time usually meant that mothers used the computer "during the day in-between housework, childcare or part-time work" or "if both parents worked during the day, then they had to negotiate between themselves who got [the] first turn at the PC after the children" (Frohlich, et al., 2003, p. 306). Usually children had first access to the computer, which meant that adults worked later in the evening. In another study, Burke (2001) found that many women did not formally discuss computer use and scheduling because they rationalized scheduling using "inner computer time scheduling," which often prioritized others' requests to use the computer (p. 614). In this same study, a quarter of the women felt guilty about using computers and felt that their computer use was "accepted or tolerated by partners, but on the understanding that this was an aberration" (p. 613). For these women, using the computer often represented spending less time on domestic tasks and less time with family members.

Laptop use is increasing (Chang et al., 2008; J. Mann, 2008; Mitchell, 2005), which raises additional questions about where and how computers are used, especially with the increase in popularity with the rise of wireless Internet access which allows more options for computer use (Horrigan, 2007). Burke (2001) found a gendered division around laptop use. Men were generally the laptop users in her study.

Concluding Perspectives

Based on the preceding literature review, areas of tension in both research about online learning and in women's experience learning online persist. Research on this topic continues to highlight the complexities of this field, showing how women can both benefit from and be limited by online learning. The individual experiences of women learning online also illustrate the many issues that intersect in online learning experiences. These learners are continually negotiating multiple responsibilities, expectations and priorities with differing supports and varying degrees of success. These issues present multiple interpretations of women's experiences with online learning, suggesting the need for a poststructural feminist examination. And, since women continue to learn in situations that require them to negotiate tensions on an ongoing basis, examining those tensions from the perspective of the women who are living and learning with them, has the potential to benefit online learners by informing those who develop, deliver and facilitate online learning.

STUDYING WHILE WORKING: DEBRA

Debra

Program: Bachelor of Arts in communications, finished the program a year before interview

Family situation: Age 52, married (empty nesters), 2 children

Employment: FT in a job related to her program

Previous/Concurrent Online Experience: none

“My life was a blur for 2 years”



Figure 3. Debra's first photo of her life as a blur.

My day would look like this: I got up at 10 minutes to 5. I got ready and went to the gym for 5:30 a.m. I wouldn't have gotten there any other way. It was me and my girlfriend, and that was when we visited. If I had a presentation and I

was working on my piece, I would bounce things off her. And then I'd be able to come home and scramble a few notes down. She probably never, ever knew that.

I came home from the gym at 6:30 a.m. and got ready for work. I was working full-time and for me when I do something I put my all into it. I usually got there about 7:30 in the morning and some nights I worked till like 6 or 7 o'clock, plus there's a 20-minute commute each way daily.

At noon, I'd stop work and study. I lugged a school bag to work for two years. I would take every minute I got to do schoolwork. We used to walk lunch hours, but I didn't walk for 2 years. I never went in the lunchroom anymore.

Then I would come home, anywhere between 5 and 7 o'clock and I knew exactly what I was doing that night. I would come home and I would go upstairs, change into something comfy and go straight down on the PC.

My husband would come home and cook. He would say, "dinner's ready" and I would run up, eat dinner and go back down again. There was none of that leisurely fine dining or anything.

I tried to finish working by 10 but sometimes it took me a lot longer. So if I started at seven, I would be working later. It would be about four hours a night. I wasn't online for all that time. I also had research and reading to do. I really liked the nights that I didn't have to go online for a long period of time and I had no research to do. I liked it when I had a book and I could just retire upstairs and read. That was always comforting and relaxing. I was freer. Otherwise, I had been on the PC all day at work and then I was on the PC all night at home.

My program was two years. Every eight weeks we finished a course but in the 6th week we started another one so there was always a 2-week period where classes overlapped. At that time, we were going into finals and we were trying to get our heads around the new course. Those 2 weeks every 2 months were a bit of a challenge.

We went year round. We did get a break for Christmas. It was always a week. We got a month off in the summer -- well three weeks of that month were spent in classes on campus. And then we came home; we had one week left in August before classes started again in September.



Figure 4. Debra's second photo of her life as a blur.

“Things I had to let slide”



Figure 5. Debra's photo of an apple.

These pictures represent things that I had to let slide. And one of them was, [my husband] could no longer just freely eat an apple. He had to either hide away or go to a different room. And so he would come down and take an apple and sometimes he'd go and just silently try and bite into an apple, which would take him about an hour to eat. So that was one of the things that he did last July when I was finished my two years. He went and got an apple and chomped. It was like a private a joke.

“It was like walking into an empty space and it isn’t an empty space normally.”



Figure 6. Debra's first photo of her garden.

While I was studying, my flowerpots remained empty. I enjoy being able to come out to my garden. But, while I was in school, it was weeds. It felt stressful. I felt deprived, sometimes a little angry. Sometimes I would even say, “Why am I doing this?” I would check a box and say “yes, this is going to help me in my career, in the long run” and “yes, it feels good to be doing something I always wanted to do.” But then sometimes I would get frustrated because I felt like everything was closing in on me. All these things I wanted to do and there’s not time anymore so I’d walk out on my deck. And it was like walking into an empty space and it isn’t an empty space normally.



Figure 7. Debra's second photo of her garden.

“We want to carry her”

We have some very close friendships that came out of this experience. One in particular: this girl down east who lost her husband during the course. We were finishing our last course in July and she lost him that March. So Good Friday she said, “I can’t do this”, and we went, “yes you can.” So we wrote to her prof and said “we want to carry her” and he said, “you do what you have to do. She’s yours, she’s your schoolmate.” And so two of us, one girl from Nanaimo and myself carried her through the end of that course. And then she got to the time where there was the overlap of the two courses and we thought, “She’s not going cope” so we got her through that. Anyway she did graduate with us. She walked across the stage with his picture in her hand.

“My photo shelves quickly became binder shelves”



Figure 8. Debra's photo of her photo shelves.

My bookshelves did change. We have no other family here and family means a lot to us. And my only connection with my family was pictures. When the nieces and nephews were growing and we didn't get to see or touch them. Having their photographs out kind of helped us stay connected. So photographs were really, really important to me. When I was studying, my photo shelves quickly became binder shelves. Shelves of binders with things I wanted at my fingertips. And of course then I had a working shelf with my papers laid out or things I'm supposed to be reading and focusing on for this particular course. And one shelf was another course.



Figure 9. Debra's photo of her binder shelves.

“I didn’t want to inundate my husband with my schoolwork”

My husband is my best friend. He’s my soul mate. He’s my husband, and I felt like sometimes I was neglecting him. I was leaving my best friend off to the side. And he never once put any pressure on me to make me feel that way but he’d be up in the kitchen whistling away and I thought, we could be up having a great conversation, getting caught up on our day and things like that. But I knew that could never happen. Instead, I was chatting with the team and I knew I wasn’t totally engaged in the discussion, because I knew I could be up with my friend. I didn’t want to inundate my husband with my schoolwork and the few times that we did get a chance to talk, it was about things that we were missing out on. I wanted it to be not schoolwork. Just like when you leave work, you have some

quality time in a different environment. There was the odd time I would bounce things off him. But they were rare. When we talked I just wanted it to be different.

CHAPTER 5: DESCRIBING AND DEFINING THE EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN LEARNING ONLINE

To set the stage for this chapter about how women's experience learning online, I will share some comments from the women that explore the notions of "diversity of women learning online" and "what is unique about online learning." I will then examine some of the discourses that shape women's experiences as online learners, namely, (1) discourse about lifelong learning, (2) discourse about online learning, (3) discourse about women as superheroes, (4) discourse about women and technology, (5) discourse about the authority of professors, and (6) discourse about the authority of institutions.

What is unique about studying online?

With the increased access to the Internet, online library resources, communication through email and integration of course management systems (CMS)⁵ in post-secondary learning contexts, it is important to ask what makes online learning different from any other formal learning experience. If students use their laptops to access their lecture notes online or participate in an online discussion with their classmates between classes, or email their professor with questions, or submit their assignments and access their marks through Blackboard, then should we not also consider them to be online learners? With the

⁵ "At its simplest a course management system is a tool that allows an instructor to post information on the web without that instructor having to know or understand HTML or other computer languages. A more complete definition of a CMS is that it provides an instructor with a set of tools and a framework that allows relatively easy creation of online course content and the [subsequent] teaching and management of that course including various interactions with students taking the course" (Meerts, 2003, p. 1).

opportunities for the blending of media, face-to-face and computer-mediated communication, and synchronous and asynchronous communications within both online and on-campus courses and programs (Rovai & Jordan, 2004; Shank, 2004), this is an important question to answer. (As a graduate student who works at home many days and interacts with my supervisor primarily through email I often wonder about this myself). Defining online learning is challenging, and as the participants within this research project have already demonstrated, no universal experience of online learning exists. Each woman's experience of online learning is unique. These women are enrolled at different institutions, different levels (non-credit, certificate/diploma programs, bachelor's degree, and graduate degrees (both Master's and PhD)), and in different fields of study. They have used different technology to facilitate their learning – whether it was synchronous and asynchronous, text-based, auditory, visual, independent, in cohorts they created themselves, in institutionally mandated cohorts, in groups within their courses and programs or with different degrees of face-to-face interactions (none, optional and required). The experiences are unique also because of the different experiences and subjectivities these women bring to their online learning. They come from different employment situations, families of varying sizes and types, different generations, urban and rural settings, and different educational backgrounds and goals.

The following characteristics may help to differentiate online learning from “traditional” or “on campus” or “face-to-face” learning. They are based on the experiences of the women in this study and the diversity of online learning

environments they experienced. (See chapter 1 for more formal definitions of online learning.)

Flexibility of Time and Location of Studying

Online learners usually have some flexibility in determining where and when they complete their course work. They are not usually required to be in a specific classroom at a regular time over a series of weeks or months. There are, of course, exceptions: some programs have regular synchronous discussions using software like Elluminate to facilitate audio and video communication, while other programs have required summer workshops on campus where students attend orientation activities or classes over a period of days or weeks.

[In] the summer [learning online] was really nice because I just could do what I wanted when [I wanted]. I could hand in [assignments on my schedule]. Normally, I waited, [and] I did three modules at a time, [and] I handed it all in. Then I did the next three modules, [and] handed those all in, and... it was nice I could do my work in a bunch when I had a lot of time. (Amy)

You had a class once a week [for synchronous online meetings] and that was great, but then I could go on at 3 o'clock in the morning or I could go on at midnight. So it wasn't always this time constraint for me. So that worked well. And the laptop and wireless [added to the convenience and flexibility]. (Sharon)

There were also benefits. For instance, I could take a day off in the middle of the week and make up the time on the weekend, if I wanted to. (Tracy)

Distance From Instructor and/or Classmates

Usually online students are separated from their instructors by time and/or distance. Separation by time means that communication is usually asynchronous, or that students and professors do not all need to be logged on to their course site at the same time. They may have scheduled synchronous meeting times, but generally they read and respond online at their convenience.

I laugh because I was in Hoehot, Inner Mongolia staying at a Holiday Inn and was able to email my stuff. [I could] just write up a paper and send it off, or be part of a conversation. So there was never a reason why I couldn't be part of it....with my laptop I could do it anywhere. (Sharon)

However, being in a small or isolated community can also pose challenges for learners. Karen only has access to dial-up Internet from her rural home. This slower and less reliable connection influences her participation in her online courses: "I lose out on a lot of online offerings. I cannot hear most audio clips or view most video clips, and some web pages take a very long time to load."

Separation by distance means that students and their instructors may be in different geographical locations or may not be aware of each other's geographical location. One participant was surprised to discover her professor was from out of the province:

The professor's in BC... I was surprised when I found that out because I had taken a class from her at [the university] last summer and thought she

was from here. As it turned out she is from here but recently moved to an island off the coast of BC. She is also retired and doing writing and online teaching as a second career. (Linda)

There is no requirement that either the instructor or students be located in proximity to the post-secondary institution. Indeed among these women, there were students studying at institutions located in different provinces and even in the United States. Sometimes students happen to live in close proximity to each other and may arrange face-to-face meetings, or in other cases they may never meet anyone associated with their program in person.

To this day, I have never met any of the students or professors in that program f-2-f, although we share a number of research projects and publications. I have enjoyed a wonderful practice with a fellow graduate for the past 6 years. He lives in [one community] and I live in [another region of the province]. We have never met f-2-f, and rarely talk on the phone (i.e. 1-2 times a year). (Karen)

Although some programs mandate face-to-face interactions through orientation programs or summer workshops, the majority of interactions occur online. The participants in this study generally found the face-to-face meetings to be beneficial in allowing them to get to know their classmates; however they found these experiences were often very intense.

The other benefit is that when we get together in person (summer institute or weekend seminar), my comfort transfers to the group and I feel at ease participating in the discussions. (Jessica)

Summer campus experiences in Vancouver were exhausting for the whole family. (Karen)

The physical separation of the instructor and students allows women to participate from different locations, even if they are travelling around the world. It also allows them to access educational programs outside of their home community or home province, which is especially important if there are no post-secondary options close to home. In some cases, the women did have to travel to other communities to participate in face-to-face sessions. While the sessions were beneficial, the travel could be challenging for both the women and their families, affirming the benefits of online learning in these women's opinions.

Connection Primarily Through Online Technology

Most communication in online courses is technology-mediated – meaning it occurs through, usually, Internet or web-based communication systems. The specific type of interface can include open source options (e.g. Moodle), commercially available course management systems (e.g. BlackBoard, WebCT or Vista) and audio/video conferencing programs (e.g. Elluminate) or proprietary software developed specifically by an institution for use by its students. Communication can be synchronous or asynchronous. It is often text-based, but can also include audio and video components. Students can often communicate privately with individuals (internal email) or with a small work group, or publicly with the whole class (discussion forum). The types of communication technologies used depend on the professor and/or institution.

The technologies allowed us to communicate, and then form bonds. Most interactions began with required discussion board postings and virtual class activities. Emails picked up where those left off. We loved experimenting, and finding new ways to ship research and writings between each other. Some of us were students, others were professors.

(Karen)

One professor didn't use Elluminate but he posted questions. He put us in groups and posted questions once a week, and then we had to go to that site and answer those questions as a group. (Sharon)

Well there's two ways [the instructor] communicates, she had email within Vista. And that's where we submit the stories, our work. And then [there is] the discussion section. We switch to that, and that's where we all do our critiquing. (Linda)

Intensity

Many of the women learning online in this study spoke about the intensity of their experiences. This intensity was evident in orientation programs where students worked for 16 to 20 hours a day (Debra). This intensity had benefits for the learners in that being part of an orientation “boot camp,” which Debra and Nicole experienced, brought students together and helped them to create a strong sense of community in a short time (Haythornthwaite, et al., 2000; Kazmer, 2002):

It was gruelling. We saw more tears. We saw more confessions than I think a group of people saw since they were teenagers. (Debra)

The intensity of the orientation program also served as a way to “weed out” students who were not committed to the program.

And it was to weed out the people who were [not] in it for the right reasons. We started out with 32 people and we graduated with less than 15. [The professors] said, “This is the way it’s going to be. It’s going to be tough. There’s going to be times when you’re going to have to compromise, sacrifice and move on.” And people who were willing to do that were successful. And people who knew that this was going to be hard, finished. (Debra)

A sense of intensity was also noted in courses and the structure of the overall program. It was apparent in Nicole’s course where they exchanged hundreds of posts in a two-day period each week, and in some learners’ work schedules, like Cynthia who was putting 70 to 100 hours each week into her courses. Course scheduling was also demanding – with courses that overlapped and programs that ran for the whole year with very few breaks (Debra, Cynthia). In these situations, students were continually focused on their schoolwork. The intensity created connections between students as they shared a passion for their course material.

I enrolled in online courses expecting to feel the same isolation that I experienced in f-2-f and DE courses. By the middle of the first term, I had already developed a deep, long-term friendship. Most of my current

friends and my business partner come from this online program. (Karen)

The intensity of the program helped women to stay focused. Debra said that knowing her program was only two years helped her to stay focused. She knew she could not maintain that level of work for a long period of time, but having a finite goal helped her to complete her program.

The intensity of the program also made it very obvious when it ended. One participant talked about being “addicted” to the connection with her classmates:

When the program ended for me, I walked around in a daze for about 2 months. I felt the kind of withdrawal that I imagine smokers who are learning to quit must feel. I was addicted to my studies and my fellow students. Over the next two years, those closest to me shared similar feelings. We try to satisfy this addiction by keeping in contact, passing along tidbits of interest to each other, and looking for new research projects to work on together whenever possible. (Karen)

This sense of loss after a program ends or when students take a different set of courses confirms that students feel connected to each other, and that they value that connection (Haythornthwaite, et al., 2000; Kazmer, 2005b; Lawlor, Thompson, & Kelland, 2008).

It is unclear whether this feeling of intensity is unique to online learning, though participants in this study and other research indicate that learning online can be harder or more time consuming than face-to-face classes (Kramarae, 2001). Maybe it is something that develops in learning environments where there are certain characteristics of program structure and participant connection.

However, it appears that this intensity may help participants to connect and to stay motivated through the program. Forming strong emotional ties at a “boot camp” orientation builds a sense of community that extends beyond the orientation (Haythornthwaite, et al., 2000). Being so invested in the program may help learners to commit to the program, and the constant demands of schoolwork may create either a continual pull back to schoolwork or a sense of momentum that pulls the students through the program (Haythornthwaite, et al., 2000; Hodgkinson, 2002).

From another perspective, the close connections and sense of community may serve as a form of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1979), whereby learners feel they must conform and persist in the program rather than disappoint their classmates. Similar to the context of the circle in adult education, the feeling of connection among online learners may carry an “implicit pressure to participate and perform” (Brookfield, 2001, A Synaptic Economy of Power section, para. 8). The learners may unconsciously feel they need to participate for the benefit of the community of learners or they may be gauging the efforts of other class members to ensure their participation is comparable (T. L. Thompson, et al., 2007).

Lack of Universal Experience of Online Learning

While the poststructural feminist literature I have reviewed affirms the assertion that there is no typical or universal experience of a woman learning online, more importantly, the women I spoke with illustrated it through their experiences, their interactions with each other in the focus group, and their

reflections on the experiences of other learners in their classes. I quickly realized that these women each had unique experiences to share. These experiences are shaped by each woman's own individual subjectivities as well as the characteristics of their programs of study, their institutions, and the professors and students who are part of their learning experiences. The diversity of their experiences is highlighted in their individual narratives.

Diversity in Classmates

The diversity of women's experiences as online learners is further illustrated by the stories that they mentioned about their classmates:

A lot of them are mothers of three ... there were quite a few of them actually that were juggling that. (Amy)

One woman is in Saskatchewan. [She] is having a hell of a time because she has dial-up. And she said it's really hard ... so what she tried to do, once a week, was go to the library when she had to do lots of work... she'd drive miles to go [to the library]. But she is really dedicated. (Linda)

One ...was a single mom and, [she] had a teenage daughter and it became a little bit too much. She said, "I need a break. And the school gave her that break...." [Another woman] lost her husband. She had a 6-year-old kid and she was torn. She cried almost every day because she missed her daughter.... that was a heartache for her, to be out on the opposite end of the country. And, then there was another woman who lives in Nanaimo,

[she] had 2 teenage daughters. And her husband was like my husband. I mean [he] was totally in there, and he was very supportive and, [he] kept the girls engaged. (Debra)

These stories, plus the diverse experiences of the women in this study, confirm that there is no universal experience of online learning. Each person's experiences depend on personal subjectivities (gender, race, age, ability, class, sexual orientation, family situation), educational context (program of study, institution, professor) and other responsibilities in their lives (paid employment, volunteer work, community involvement, family responsibilities, social activities, other educational activities).

These women recognize the tension of a diversity of perspectives within their online classes: that that tension can present both opportunities and challenges. In many cases, the women are aware of and recognize the value of diversity in their learning experiences. They comment on how having classmates from different geographical locations, and different academic and career backgrounds is helpful to them in their learning:

And it was all the backgrounds and all the information that you can get from... twenty-five different people around the country. It really added to the classroom environment I would say... there were mothers with three kids at home who decided to go back to school. There were students like myself doing another course.... It was just varied backgrounds. (Amy)

What we had in the class was diverse from a demographics perspective, [including] age and geographical locations. (Debra)

Diversity of experience provides an opportunity for the women to benefit from the experiences of their classmates, and it also provides an opportunity for the women to see different perspectives and learn from them. As Cynthia points out, she learned to value herself and the comments of others when she embraced their diverse perspectives:

Valuing my own uniqueness makes it easier to value and respect the views of others...it is the diversity of beliefs that has become exciting. (Cynthia)

The women I interviewed and those who participated in the focus group also identified some characteristics that make it difficult to create connections with a diverse group of students. These characteristics include gender, age or generational differences, geographic location, cohorts, and different interests or academic goals.

Gender.

Statistics state that the majority of online learners are women and the comments from participants in this study indicate it:

There was 12 in a group to begin with ... there was only one fellow, the rest were women, and he had an accident of some sort and so he dropped out. (Linda)

Our class was primarily women. We had four men in our class. One switched to day school. ... Then we had one guy who [moved away] and

he was going to go long distance but fell off the rails... We had one other guy who really didn't work that hard. I really believe that he was one of the guys that thought, "You know what, I can ride on the coat tails, and this is easy." And he never really put a lot into things ... so, finally, after the first year, he dropped out. And, so one guy graduated with us in the end. (Debra)

I think there were twenty in our first group -- 15 females and five males. (Sharon)

In contrast, only one woman indicates that in her program most of the students are men:

Initially I was very timid, conscious of the fact that there were very few women in the online technology courses that I took. The technology professors were male. They played a key role in drawing me out. (Karen)

She appreciates the online environment because she feels gender is “a non-issue.” She explains that unlike in “f-2-f [face-to-face] technology classes, I was usually the lone female. Since activities and tasks were individualized, there was rarely reason for me to interact with the men.” She finds that shared interests made gender less of a factor in online learning.

While Karen finds the Internet reduced the importance of gender, Barbara points out that communicating online highlights other gender differences, affirming that gender makes a difference in how students communicate and interact online:

One extra [comment] I had, involved communication with other students online, especially because styles of communication came up that were sometimes intimidating. I found that usually the ones to bow out were female. That I found really interesting. (Barbara)

Participants also share how they imagine that men's experiences with online learning would be different:

I think the house stuff is usually unique for women. I think men get pulled more from [their] jobs, spending time with family...not so much with the cleaning stuff. (Linda)

I believe that women choose online learning because they are busy. More women than men enroll in online learning. They tend to be part-time students, as opposed to the general trend of full-time campus enrollment. These women are also older than those taking campus courses. They have higher incomes than those on campus. Finally, online female learners typically study after 8 pm, while their online male counterparts prefer to study from 4-8 pm (Connick, 1999, Kramarae, 2001, Gallagher, 2009).

These demographics suggest that the typical online female student has a career and, most likely, a family. The fact that online males study from 4-8 pm and women study after 8 pm suggests that women are more likely to be cooking meals, cleaning and taking care of children after a day of work, while men place studying as the priority at this time of day. (Karen)

Linda feels that men face different expectations about what they do in addition to their online work, while Karen shares some research that shows how men and women approach their online learning differently. These statements suggest that it is not just the experience of learning that is gendered but also the context in which it occurs.

Age and generational differences.

One of the recurring differences that created tensions between students is based on age or generational differences:

Since we are writing autobiography, the things they write indicate how old they are...i.e., I was born in such and such [a year], at such and such [a location]. The older students seem more confident in autobiography writing...[is it like they think] "I don't have that much time left so I am going to just do this and I don't care what others think of my style." The younger ones...(i.e. the ones in their forties and less) are usually really self-deprecating about their writing even when some of them are wonderful writers. (Linda)

Of course, being the mature student when ... you made a commitment you're there. ... The kids -- and I call them kids and that's not fair --. The students who were fresh out of high school going right into college, they're a little more nimble. Their memories are probably a lot sharper than ours, and they still partied and things like that. And we couldn't

understand and had lesser appreciation for it.... So absolutely, different priorities. (Debra)

Now that distance education often incorporates online studies, I think that isolation is experienced differently and can be avoided. I think that young undergraduates who study online instead of on campus might feel like I did, like they are missing something. For mature students or graduate students, some may feel isolated in that they miss the F2F interactions or they miss the classroom energy. (I don't). Some may feel that online communication and interaction is a good way to counter the isolation and to meet people. I kind of like a certain amount of isolation and independence from the group dynamics. (Michelle)

Geographical differences.

Another aspect of diversity is geographical location. This characteristic plays a role in a few different ways. First, students in different time zones face challenges with synchronous communications:

[To participate in an online asynchronous class while travelling for work] I had to be up at 2 o'clock in the morning. But you know, just to be able to do that is pretty amazing. (Sharon)

There was a lady from Israel [in] one course. They asked us if we would change our time [to accommodate her]. It wasn't that great because it was like Sunday nights at 7 o'clock and then it would catch her in the morning.

So that time wasn't so good [for the rest of us]. But it was only one course so people said, "Yeah." Otherwise she had to be online whenever the professor decided. And then [there were] the people in Prince Edward Island, it was only [a] two hour [time difference] so that wasn't so bad.
(Sharon)

Because of the time difference (we have students who are all around the world too) sometimes they're writing in the middle of the night... So there's someone online most of the time. *(Nicole)*

Second, students who are in different communities from their classmates sometimes felt they miss out on opportunities:

There are probably about half of us [who] are from [the city where the institution is located]. And then the rest are scattered. ... Sometimes the students from far away comment that they wish they were closer so they could attend some writing events that our teacher often informed us about.
(Linda)

Third, students who are in different countries faced additional bureaucratic and financial challenges:

I think there were twenty in our first group – 15 females and five males. And [they came] from all across Canada. One lady [was] from Israel, [and] two from the U.S. The U.S. people didn't stay in after that first summer because they had to pay international tuition. *(Sharon)*

Every year I have to do a residency in the States. So I go for a week to 2 weeks, depending on which residency I'm doing, and participate in a very intensive kind of collaborative work with other researchers and whatnot. And they say it's to support learning, and to give students a chance to be surrounded by other peers 'cause it is distance education. But I think the US actually has a law that if they're going to be accredited, students have to spend a certain amount of time in the States. (Cynthia)

However, the geographical distance can be bridged through face-to-face orientation programs or summer seminars on campus:

[At our orientation] we had people from Prince Edward Island, Ontario, Saskatchewan, Alberta, B.C. And so they put us into groups and then we formed our own groups [as we got to know each other] It was important to meet first and then it was easy to connect through the technology. (Sharon)

There's an option for me to go in the summer time and that's pretty essential to this program because then you all become best friends and then you can visualize who you're working online with during the year. (Nicole)

Actually I know three of [my classmates] as it turns out. We didn't know we were taking the same class either until we actually started... so that was cool. (Linda)

In some cases students initiated their own face-to-face meetings:

There are several people in each Canadian city and a lot through the States and the rest of the world. So often people who are in the same city will meet up on their own socially. Sometimes like maybe a couple of times a year or something. (Nicole)

We had an awesome graduation. I had family and friends come with me. We stayed at this wonderful inn. And they had little cottages, we told all of our class and they were all bringing family with them and they each stayed in little cottages. And it was wonderful... almost like a family reunion again 'cause we only got to see each other those three times. (Debra)

(Question: So you said someone else from your institution was taking the same program at the same time, was that deliberate, or did it just happen?) It just happened. There was a lady from [a nearby community] and the three of us got together sometimes as well in person. But you know the conference call worked well. (Sharon)

Cohort differences.

Another type of division that women experience is being separate from or left out of a cohort. Many of the women are in programs where students progress through the program as a cohort. However, students can end up out of synch with their original cohorts:

At the same time, my connections with peers have become less important. This may have more to do with my situation than with the process itself. The program is designed in a cohort model. So, typical students progress through the program at a similar pace and thus form a group. I took two leaves of absences to have children, so I left my groups twice. As such, ... leaving groups behind has decreased my attachments to the group and has left me relying more on myself to get through. (Jessica)

I started the program alone, but was soon swept up in the excitement that I shared with others. Pretty soon I found myself scanning class lists to see if anyone I knew was registered. One of my group members from my first class and I took a few courses together. However, she was farther along than I in the program, and soon dropped off the face of the earth to do her thesis. I'd get an email from her every now and then. She struggled for two years, and then decided to give up the thesis for the course route. By then I was in my final classes, so we didn't get to work together again. (Karen)

Other participants are in programs that do not use a cohort model or programs where they complete independent study classes. Some of these women feel they miss out on the connections that are formed in cohorts:

Cohort groups shift each class so permanency of relationships becomes almost moot. One tends to focus on intense creative relationships that will stimulate shared academic excellence rather than on forming personal relationships. (Cynthia)

I was part of a cohort in [my graduate] program, but there was never any formal effort on part of the program administrators or faculty to make us feel like a cohort (e.g. cohort meetings, activities, casual coffee houses, etc.). This may have been partially because I was in the 3rd intake; this same program may have mandatory (e.g. institutionally-imposed) or casual (e.g. student-body activated) cohort bonding experiences now. Since we could choose whether we wanted to be full or part-time, and could make this decision on a term-by-term basis, a defined cohort never evolved. Thus, it was up to us as to how engaged in a cohort we wanted to be. (Karen)

This desire to be part of a cohort or a group suggests that these women feel that learning should occur in a group and that they want to feel connected to their classmates, and feel a sense of loss when a connection ends (Kazmer, 2005b; Lawlor, et al., 2008). This desire for connections is supported by research about online learning, which promotes “a collaborative-constructivist” learning (Garrison & Archer, 2007, p. 78).

Different interests and academic goals.

Another type of division occurs when women feel that their educational interests and goals are not compatible with those of their classmates. This division was particularly obvious in Cynthia’s situation. She was the only person interested in working in higher education while her classmates were teaching in the k-12 system:

I think that the most fragmented piece for me was coming to recognize that learning with people at a different level who are focused very intently on a very specific area can be quite fragmented. And 'cause you want to be supportive, you want to support them in their learning, but you also want to be supported (...) So that's probably been one of the greatest challenges, which was interesting to me 'cause it never entered my mind. It's not one of those [things] you think could get in the way. That was probably one of the things I'd never thought about in a million years that there'll be Grade 2, Grade 3, Grade 4 teachers, Kindergarten teachers. The way they see the world is different because, of course, they want a lot of rules. (Cynthia)

Some programs actively encourage students to create communities through orientations, and relationships with faculty. In other situations, students take the initiative to form their own connections. In both contexts, women can develop close relationships with classmates and communicate with them both through the institutional course interfaces and other means of communication. However, not all programs focus their resources on building communities. One of the ongoing challenges some of these women face is creating connections when they are enrolled in programs that did not actively support creating connections among learners. Some women talked about figuring out how much energy to invest in creating relationships and how much to spend on assignments:

A tension that I don't think was included so far was group work. When we were expected to do group work, it was very difficult to coordinate.

Without the [face-to-face] ability to discuss things, it was hard to get a handle on whether there was a real consensus on what we were doing. Also, with everyone so busy, I came across students who just wanted to get it done and over with. There seemed to be a lot of waiting for answers/emails, or missing emails. It is really difficult to work [online] with someone you don't know... especially with people from different backgrounds. There also seems to be a subconscious thought about whether the effort to develop a relationship will be worth the time and energy if it will be so short term. So in online environments, I think there are different types of relationships than there are in [face-to-face] courses and classrooms. (Barbara)

Deciding how to invest time is a concern for women learning online as they have other demands competing for their time, and in some cases, they consciously choose how much time and energy they are willing to devote to forming online relationships (Haythornthwaite, et al., 2000; Lawlor, et al., 2008).

In response to feeling they were working independently, other women created their own support groups:

Our mini-cohort bonded with three professors who demonstrated great openness, love of subject and desire to impart this love on others. Numerous research projects sprang from this bonding. These professors made us feel valued, telling us that we were making important contributions to our field. While working on projects with these professors, I felt as if I was an equal. They listened patiently, accepted my

contributions, and welcomed my ideas. (Karen)

The group was four women from 3 different institutions and we were all hard workers and intent on doing well. We supported each other through discussions, editing papers, talking to each regularly, sharing readings and making notes. Through the technology we were able to connect daily... (Sharon)

We all decided for the summer we needed to encourage each other... we sort of started a group.... so now we're on regular email. (Linda)

Whether or not the institutions these women attended devoted resources to creating a feeling of connection among their students, these women sought that connectedness. Usually, they developed their own online and offline groups to support their learning. Jessica and Michelle are exceptions who found ways to work independently.

Commonalities Among Women

Despite the diversity among the women in this study and their classmates, there seem to be some commonalities among the women in this study. They are clearly not “at an educational disadvantage” (Perraton, 2007, p. 95); they are not learners who are relying on online learning to provide them with access to a second-class educational experience (Perraton, 2007). These women are learners who have made a conscious decision to pursue online learning. To make this decision they had to be aware of their different options and to be able to make

decisions about their learning. They understand how post-secondary education is structured and delivered in Canada. In many cases they have previous or concurrent experiences with online or distance education, either as a learner or an instructor, which is a factor associated with success in online courses (Dupin-Bryant, 2004). As a group, these women show a strong desire to identify and achieve their own academic or personal goals. They have the ability to work independently and the motivation they need to persist through challenging times (Kazmer, 2002). While their approaches to organization vary, they have developed systems to manage their time and meet deadlines (Roper, 2007). These women all have access to the skills and resources necessary to use a computer and access the Internet, though the financial cost of pursuing their education is often a pressure (Kramarae, 2001). They have generally been in good physical health and they have not had traumatic events nor unusual or unexpected stressors that could interfere with their studies (Castles, 2004).

While not all of the women had previous experience with online learning or expected it to be a positive learning experience, they were generally satisfied with their experiences, and in many cases found they were pleasantly surprised by what online learning could offer:

I was surprised that we felt really connected, that you could really sense each other's personalities online. (Nicole)

Online learning was a refreshing, delightful surprise for me. (Karen)

And I just really enjoyed [taking bachelor's degree courses online]. And I decided, if I was going to do my doctoral, I'd look for a distance program.

(Cynthia)

According to the women in the focus group, who discussed this topic, online learners do require certain characteristics to be successful:

Often when I consider online courses, I notice a list of characteristics of a successful online student. They usually include self-motivated, and self-disciplined and a willingness to spend a considerable amount of time outside of 'class time.' It is almost a given that online students are a unique breed. Eventually I can imagine that delivery of online courses will be more inclusive, but for now there seems to be a higher expectation of the student work ethic. I also think that those who enter into online courses are aware of this and try to live up to it. (Barbara)

As a former high school teacher, I think that not all students may feel that online study is ideal for them. The students who need a lot of guidance or those who might be at risk for dropping out may not be inclined to 'trudge' through all of the work and time involved in online learning. They could get discouraged or even become indifferent, not knowing where to start. It may work if they had a mentor or tutor. (Michelle)

I think that the characteristics of 'self-directed' and 'self-motivated' are accurate. I think successful online learners are determined and

independent. As for whether the online learners feel isolated or not, I think it depends on whether the individual learner feels the need to connect with others or to trudge through the work on her own. (Michelle)

Many of the characteristics successful online learners identified and were embodied by the research participants echo the traits identified by Kramarae (2001): “highly motivated,” “independent,” “older, more mature or non-traditional age students,” “good computer skills,” and “ambitious” (pp. 21-22). Learners in Kazmer’s (2002) research also described how distance learners have to be self-motivated, responsible, independent and “extremely persistent” (Aspect 7: Efforts and Rewards section, para. 2).

The shared characteristics of the women may be a reflection of the dominant discourses in their ideas about learning, work and women’s roles. They clearly all value education and see it as important in their work lives (with the exception of Linda who is retired) yet they are also invested in other activities like family and work that prevent them from attending a full-time, on-campus program. They subscribe to the belief that online learning will provide the flexibility they need to fit education into their busy lives with the least possible disruption. And, despite the challenges, they are persisting with their studies, and will likely complete them because that is important to them.

Discourses Shaping the Experiences of Online Learners

Women in this study have their experiences shaped by a number of discourses, which define what types of thinking and acting are acceptable and

unacceptable and ensure individuals conform to dominant discourses (St. Pierre, 2000; Strega, 2005). The impact of these discourses is reflected in these women's reasons for taking courses, their choice of online learning, their expectations of online learning, their roles as women, and their relationships with technology. However, these women do not necessarily always conform to the dominant discourse. They make choices and take action to consciously resist and subvert discourses.

Discourse of Lifelong Learning

Most of the participants, with the exception of Linda who is retired, have chosen to participate in online learning courses for career-related reasons. They are either upgrading their skills or training for new careers, reflecting the discourse of lifelong learning, which Edwards and Usher (2007) describe: "The meaning of lifelong learning in this new game is that no one can or must stop learning, not only in relation to work but also in relation to life more generally" (p. 60). These women are seeking new or better career opportunities in a context where "lifelong learning signifies being motivated, skilled and effectively positioned" (Gambescia & Paolucci, 2009, p. 62). Many of the participants have plans for completing additional studies in the future: Karen, Amy, Barbara, Michelle, Debra, and Cynthia said they were considering some form of graduate studies. The one retired participant, Linda, is taking courses to "keep [her] mind active and busy" so she can avoid ending up in a seniors "lodge." Her reason for learning reflects the discourse that learning is a necessary and ongoing activity. The only woman who seems to offer a different perspective is Sharon who says,

“in hindsight I probably wouldn’t have entered the program... my life has been so focused that I am tired and because of my experience I didn’t really have to finish a doctorate to get ahead in my field.” While her own reflection shows she does not necessarily think that an additional graduate degree is necessary for her own career development, her desire to offer online programs for rural youth suggests that she is still shaped by the discourse of learning as an essential, ongoing activity.

Discourse of Online Learning as Different from Face-to-Face Learning

The women, many of whom were completing graduate studies (Sharon, Cynthia, Karen, Jessica), deal with the discourse about the quality of online learning:

It was their first [online cohort]. And so they were going to make sure that their rigor was the same [as in their face-to-face programs]. I think they thought they had to see people in order to make sure that the rigor was there. (Sharon)

There was a real rigidity, and I don’t think learning is enhanced by rigidity. [Jenna - So rigidity in terms of timelines or? Or ideas?] Not changing the assignment ... if you just tweak it a bit, you can create something, and that’s never welcomed and it isn’t done. It just simply isn’t done... So you learn very quickly you don’t ask. You just do the work, which I find sad. Because, on the other hand if you did something

wonderful then the person on the other side wouldn't recognize it as being wonderful anyways. (Cynthia)

And then just so many more comments [than in person] So many more contributions than you'd have in person. And I know someone who's done both the residency and then transferred to the online program, even though you're not supposed to transfer, and he said it's exquisitely better [online]. (Nicole)

This discourse seems to develop from a popular perception that online learning is less rigorous, of lower quality, and a second-class education (Noble, 1998; Perraton, 2000; M. M. Thompson, 2007; Varvel, et al., 2007). This popular perception is reinforced by email messages promising degrees based on your experience, and news stories about questionable online programs. It is also reinforced by institutions that promote their online programs as “flexible” and “convenient” rather than referring to the quality of the program or the academic reputation of the institution offering the program (Gambescia & Paolucci, 2009).

Prior to enrolling in online learning, these women had expectations based on their previous experiences with online learning and based on the public discourse about quality in online learning. Their comments show they expected online learning to be difficult because of the technology involved and to be isolating with limited connection to other learners. Throughout their online courses, these women have examined some of their expectations about online

learning. They are generally pleased and surprised when they discover online learning was not what they had expected:

I was surprised that learning the technology was easy and that I was able to get my assignments done and emailed so easily. I was surprised that the processes were easier than I expected. (Sharon)

One of the things that I think was really beneficial in my job is that, when people are talking about online learning I do have a grasp of it and it's certainly not as difficult as [I] would have thought it was. ... We're developing some courses and people are saying, "Oh, that's really difficult. How will we do that? That's really difficult." And I think it's not that difficult. (Sharon)

I was really surprised. I mean I think of myself as a pretty organic, natural, intimate kind of person so I would have thought it'd be really cold to be working online and very antisocial so I was surprised that we felt really connected, that we could really sense each other's personalities online. Plus it helps so much to go there in the summer and meet the huge gang of people who are in [my] classes. (Nicole)

Not all women were surprised by their experiences. In some cases their expectations are affirmed by their experiences:

I did. I knew exactly what was happening. I knew it was going be hard. I knew it was going be fast and hard. And I was prepared that way. (Debra)

Did I have ideas? I think it was harder than I thought it was going to be.

And I don't mean academically harder. (Cynthia)

Yet, not everyone had the same expectations or experiences learning online. Some women in the focus group spoke of how their experiences online seem to be different from the experiences of the others in the focus group:

I have taken a number of online courses and I have participated in courses that required weekly participation [in] discussions and group projects, courses that were 'published' online but had no interaction with anyone apart from the course facilitator who responded to emails and marked assignments, and courses that fell somewhere in the middle. ...

Unfortunately the majority of the courses I have completed did not include peer interaction, many of them seemed to be poorly translated versions of a face-to-face course 'published' online. (Rebecca)

I have actually never participated in online group work... In my first online course, we had an option of group work and only two groups were formed, the remaining students worked individually. (Michelle)

Some women share how their instructors' assumptions about online learning shaped their experiences:

And so ... one prof gave.... lots and lots of readings... way too much ... you could have got the point with a little bit less. But I think he didn't feel

comfortable with the technology and that was a way for him to get around that. (Sharon)

Many of the women are surprised to find that online learning is easier and more social than they expected. Their experience counters the discourse that had shaped their pre-conceptions, a discourse that suggested online learning would require advanced computer skills and would be isolating. These assumptions may come from previous experience with online and distance learning where learners did work independently and where technology was a barrier to communication rather than a tool to facilitate interaction. Contrasting experiences, where learning is less social and less engaging, affirm that the discourse about online learning has some accuracy but that it does not necessarily reflect the diversity of online programs, which create different learning environments and possess different qualities of learning.

Discourse of Women as Superheroes

The experiences of many of these women were also shaped by the discourse of women being able to do everything, and to do it all well. Hughes (2002) uses a circle with the following text to reflect women's lives and discourses that shape them: "women have made it [--] best of both worlds [--] women are caring [--] having it all [--] doing it all" (p. 6). These phrases represent the complex relationships between the different discourses that shape women and their expectations of themselves. All the women in this study have high expectations of themselves as students, employees and community members as well as mothers, wives and daughters. Most are working at least part-time while

they study, even those who are studying full time. Their experiences clearly reflect what Kramarae (2001) refers to as the “third shift” where women have work and home responsibilities, as well as school responsibilities.

These women are busy with multiple conflicting responsibilities, and they set high standards for themselves, both academically and personally. Generally, they are doing well academically; many of them are pursuing graduate studies. Despite the other commitments and challenges in their lives, they describe their marks as good:

It may be interesting to note that I have health problems and learning disabilities, but I tend to do well academically despite these challenges.
(Michelle)

The thing I haven't gotten quite sorted out in my mind yet, 'cause scholarships would be really nice, and there are only so many scholarships to go around. So it's one thing to say I'd love to truly be able to say, "I am an A student, I've got a 4.0 GPA" but actually it went down a little bit 'cause I got one A minus, so 3.98 or something like that.

(Cynthia)

The first competing tensions that come to mind I experienced in my last online course. They were finding the motivation and desire to do the work and needing to meet or exceed the standards I set for myself, which requires a lot of work and commitment. (Rebecca)

[Rebecca] hit on another tension that I recognize in my life, too. I have set personal learning goals since childhood. I am always trying to outdo my previous personal best, just as athletes do. [Striving for perfection] is strongly ingrained in me. Whether a task is small or large, I cannot do 'good enough.' I have to do it right; and I have to complete it. I get external rewards for perfection - good grades, more clients and more brides [Note: Karen works as a seamstress part-time, at home], but nothing extrinsic is as rewarding to me as the feeling that I did my best. Even at that, I know how I can improve on my best for the next project, which is always waiting for me. But perfectionism has a heavy price – I must excel. I set goals; I must reach them. Perfectionism and goal setting drive me. I do too much, and it must be perfect. It is exhilarating and exhausting – like grabbing a tiger by the tail. (Karen)

These women are motivated by both internal and external factors to achieve, and they all expect themselves to do well academically. They apply themselves to their schoolwork, and other responsibilities, with a focus on doing well. While they are conscious of their desire to be successful, they are also aware of the pressure they put on themselves to achieve and they try to keep their expectations in perspective and set priorities:

But we create these ideas for ourselves to be the best students, to get the A, to get the scholarship.... and we create a lot of stuff. We put a lot of burdens on ourselves that we don't really need to. (Cynthia)

I think, “Oh well, I’ll do as good as I can on this paper” and my marks are really good but I wasn’t going to stress myself out. (Sharon)

Perspective is everything... I have to remind myself that this really is a lot – I don’t have to be a superhero, gracefully managing every aspect of my life with poise. When I hold myself up to this standard, I invariably fall short. (Jessica)

Your comment [Jessica] about not needing to be a superhero is true, but it seems that we are all trying to be exactly that. (Karen)

The women in this study are aware of the high standards they set for themselves, but they also know where they are willing to be more flexible with their expectations. Having realistic expectations is important because of the demands of their programs (Kazmer, 2002). They gave less time and attention to responsibilities like cleaning the house and preparing meals, or they let other family members take more responsibility:

So sometimes your house doesn’t get as clean as you would like it to be because you just can’t do everything. (Sharon)

[I said to my kids,] “So this is how it is. You might be making your own supper and these are the days that I’m gone.” ... they were pretty good because they know their mom doesn’t like to cook. (Sharon)

I'm not as torn because I'm not a really cleanaholic kind of person. It probably doesn't bug me as much as for some people. But, it does feel like a problem that the place is gross so if someone drops by we're apologetic 'cause the place is disgusting. (Nicole)

All of these women are influenced by the discourse that claims women can do anything and everything they want. At times this discourse puts pressure on them to achieve in all areas of their lives. Interestingly, none of them attribute this pressure to outside sources; in fact they usually say that the people around them are supportive and encourage them not to put too much pressure on themselves. These women also try to address the pressure they put on themselves by ensuring their expectations are realistic and reasonable. This changing perspective continues to be a challenge for the women who have held these expectations of their own achievement for many years, and even most of their lives.

Discourse of Women and Technology

As they began their experience learning online, these women had to address their own assumptions about technology, and the dominant discourse, which claims men are more comfortable with and more capable of using technology (Hargittai & Shafer, 2006). At the same time, the dominance of men in the field is so ingrained that, even within the field of information technology, technology is considered to be gender neutral despite the fact the majority of decision-makers in the field are men (Kramarae & Wei, 2002; Marcelle, 2006). Feminists argue that both the processes that produce technology and the products

that are created are gendered (Kramarae & Wei, 2002). For example, women's use of computers is associated with completing domestic tasks and communication (Cassidy, 2001; Frohlich, et al., 2003).

In this study, the women's experiences both reflect and resist discourses about who should use technology and how it should be used. While all the women in this study have learned to use the technology required for their online courses, in some cases the men in their lives continue to make technology decisions that impact their learning experiences:

It was my birthday so he surprised me [with a new laptop]. Yeah it was perfect. It had everything and more. (Amy)

No [I didn't have to buy a videocamera] I lucked out that my fiancé had one. And so ... he loves doing videos and stuff so ... he did all of that. Like I sat and did the videos. He did the editing. He did the recording sometimes. He was sometimes in the videos. (Amy)

My stepson is a computer programmer. He and my husband kept telling me over the course of 8 months that I should consider a MAC and I kept saying I was happy with what I have. Then at Christmas here comes the new MAC. My husband wanted the other computer to run LINEX and LINEX always screws up Microsoft stuff...so I get the MAC whether I wanted it or not. (Linda)

So I can always reach for help, or phone him up and say, "This isn't working." (Linda)

In these situations, men make decisions about which technology these women will use without considering their input. Their reactions are very different. Amy is pleased with the choice her fiancé made while Linda feels upset her input was not considered. Both of these women appreciate having assistance with technology from their partners, and are willing to rely on them when necessary.

Other women challenge the traditional stereotype of women as less capable with computers. Both Karen and Barbara report that their husbands are "computer illiterate." Karen also says that she is one of the few women in her technology-focused online program, which is a familiar situation for her since she was one of the few women in the school district where she taught who was interested in technology. Similarly, Sharon became a more experienced computer user than some of her colleagues. She uses this experience teaching and learning online to encourage her institution to pursue more online programs. She explains that learning online is not as hard as she had expected: "And because some people really think it is difficult, [but I say] if I can figure it out, you guys will have no problems."

While some of the women in this study accept the discourse that women are less comfortable using technology, other women challenge this discourse. Online learning requires women to actively use technology to communicate with their classmates. By adopting, and in some cases embracing online learning, these women challenge the discourse about women and technology. Their experiences

learning online also encourage them to integrate technology into their work lives to further challenge this discourse:

I was one of two women in our school district with a keen interest in technology. We were patronized and subordinated by the patriarchal administration and arrogant male techies. What woman knew how to plug in a computer? (Karen)

Furthermore, these women use technology as a tool to work with and support groups who might tend to avoid technology:

My business partner and I work primarily online. We work with isolated or otherwise marginalized clients to create strong visual identities through online and print media, organize information for public use, and provide technological solutions for their online activities. (Karen)

One of the things that we're trying to do is [ensure] that every college student and every high school student will have taken one course online so that [they] understand the technology and they understand that you could work and still take courses and that doesn't mean you have to drive.... So if we can get students in rural areas more involved with online they might also begin to feel more comfortable with post secondary. (Sharon)

Many of the women in this study have pre-existing relationships with technology. In some cases, they feel uncomfortable with technology, or they leave technology decisions up to the men in their lives. In other cases, these women are comfortable with technology, even though the people around them are not

supportive. As they participate in online learning, the women become more comfortable with the technology they need for their online courses. A high degree of comfort is reflected in their responses to the demographics form I sent them. They all provided response like “fine,” “very comfortable,” and “extremely comfortable” when asked to describe how they felt using a computer.

Discourse of Professors’ Authority

Many of the women in this study see their professors as clear sources of power. They identify their professors as the people who should shape the learning environment by making decisions about content, structure, assignments and communication technologies. In many cases, professors are seen as the primary source of knowledge on the topic. In more extreme situations, these instructors are perceived of as inflexible and unquestionable authorities. For example, Cynthia tries unsuccessfully to challenge the authority of one of her professors when she feels she is unfairly marked; however, she discovers her institution has no mechanisms for students to challenge their professors’ decisions:

It’s the only university I’ve ever known that has no recourse for students... If you’re having trouble with a professor, or you disagree with a mark that you’ve been given there is nothing, there is absolutely nothing [you can do]. They say that’s the professor’s academic freedom, which I find, quite frankly, abhorrent. It’s a way of escaping being responsible. (Cynthia)

In another case, Amy feels she has to accept the lack of communication from her professor without complaint because she has done well in her class:

And in the other class I got no feedback. So I had no clue how I was doing.

I mean I was doing well and I think I'm ending up with an A plus in my class but I really didn't know if the prof got my questions online. He never responded. I could have asked for him to e-mail back, but I just assumed he would eventually. But I really got nothing over the 4 months really from him. But it worked out anyways and I did well in the class, so I can't complain. (Amy)

Other women are aware that their learning is shaped by the professors' expectations, but that they can also take responsibility for their learning. They can choose either to respond with what is expected of them or to be proactive in exploring ideas of interest to them:

'Cause I'm a clever woman and I can figure out what somebody wants. If that's all you want from me, it's quite easy. But it's not learning for me. If nothing's being created new, I'm just reflecting back what I can see that you want. And I find that sad. (Cynthia)

I was also more proactive in my own learning. I was tired of the traditional f-2-f authoritarian omnipotent teacher. As long as I parroted their views, I got the 'A.' I became a master of that system, but knew that I was cheating myself in the process. Other skills and interests were not being addressed inside this system. (Karen)

These women choose to challenge their professors' authority by setting their own learning goals outside of the program or course expectations. They make

conscious decisions about why they enroll and what they want to learn from their online courses:

So I decided if I went ... if I was going to spend all the money and energy it would have to be really authentic for me and my interests. (Cynthia)

Not to say I'm not authentic because I am and I've probably taken some hits with marks and stuff, but that's OK with me. That's a personal choice... (Cynthia)

I decided to be less conformist when I enrolled in [this graduate] program. Adopting the prevalent consumerist attitude, I rationalized that since I was paying for the program and spending my time on it, it should be mine. I knew what my learning strengths, weaknesses and interests were probably better than any one else did. I set a new path for myself, determining what I wanted to learn, and how I was going to go about it. In some courses I told my professor what I wanted to get out of the course. I never had any of them tell me that I could not do what I wanted. The program matched my desires, rather than hindered them. I was allowed to be the autonomous learner I so craved to be. (Karen)

I need a course because I need structure... So far the courses have provided me the structure I seek. The assignments and having to have pieces written by the end of every week means I settle down and get right

to it. Sometimes the technology gets in the way. Also sometimes the professor goes in a direction I don't like or don't want to go. (Linda)

Some women in this study also set priorities for how they use their study time, which sometimes means choosing not to read all the assigned materials or to contribute less than is expected of them:

[When I'm reading] if I know that I've studied it and know the concept then sometimes I would skip it. ... Yesterday, I was reading and it has little extra scenarios or case studies... some of them I read, I'll check what they're about. And then some of them I think, "OK either I skip this or it's another extra like 5 minutes, 7 minutes" which doesn't sound like much but when you're reading so much it all adds up. So I figure out what's going to be most advantageous for me in the end, I guess. (Amy)

There was one prof that wanted us to read all of [the discussion postings] and I'll be honest I didn't do any of that, ever. It was beyond what I was capable of. ... They said, "Well, through this we can tell if you're looking at everyone's and we're going to mark you on that." I thought, "Well, you know, I really don't have time to." (Amy)

Not all of the women share the view of their professors as authoritarian. Some women see their professors as learners and as collaborators. Others find their instructors to be flexible and willing to negotiate with students to better meet their learning needs:

So I'm working [on my autobiography], and the teacher's doing hers

too.... and then in the middle of the course, she said, "People have asked to see what I'm doing, and I'm writing my autobiography along with you so I would really like you to read my autobiography." She sent us three pages of a piece just taken at random and she put it on [the discussion board]. And then she had everybody critique her. (Linda)

For me, a good connection with the instructor was really important as I was finding my feet in the program. Now that I'm nearing the end of my degree, although I still value my instructor's role, I feel less dependent on the quality of the relationship. I feel independent enough to take his/her good aspects and leave the rest. (Jessica)

Our mini-cohort bonded with three professors who demonstrated great openness, love of subject and desire to impart this love [to] others. Numerous research projects sprang from this bonding. These professors made us feel valued, telling us that we were making important contributions to our field. While working on projects with these professors, I felt as if I were an equal. They listened patiently, accepted my contributions, and welcomed my ideas. (Karen)

By identifying their own learning objectives and ensuring their courses meet their needs, by choosing what to study and by connecting with their professors as colleagues, the women in this study challenge the assumption that their professors have absolute power over their learning.

Discourse of Institutional Authority

Institutional policies and structures present challenges for some women. Cynthia who is studying at an American university finds it particularly challenging to deal with the bureaucracy, which eventually leads to her looking for another institution:

I've had many disappointments with the [American university], and I think I'll be leaving them, but not because the education hasn't been great, but for a number of systems issues. They're not very good with paperwork, so my student loans are never done on time, nothing's ever done on time. I can never find the right person to talk to. Canadian students seem to be... how can I explain this? I'm assigned certain people to help me and to do all this stuff, and yet they really don't seem to know too much about what's a Canadian student loan, what's required. So it's like teaching them – OK, now the papers are coming, now you need to do this. So loans are always late. (Cynthia)

Two of the women in this study are part of the first cohorts in their programs (Sharon, Amy). While being part of this group presents challenges as professors and institutions develop their programs, these women also have the opportunity to challenge the institutional expectations about how the program will function. In both cases, these women report that they and their classmates raised concerns about the program and that these concerns have been addressed by the institution for future cohorts. Likewise, Linda is part of a group of students who

wrote letters to the coordinator of their program requesting an advanced class be created for them. They were also successful in having a new class created:

And so that's why we begged her, "Would you do another class?" So it was actually the students who begged her for a class. And she said, "Well, I don't know... you guys all have to write." The teacher said, "I can't do this – develop a class—[the program coordinator] has to know that there's going to be enough people to take it." So we picked somebody which ended up being me, to write a letter to the [program coordinator] and we told her we really want this class. And so then the teacher [developed the course]. (Linda)

The changes that occurred were that they had some separation between the sessions, less readings, more discussion. I think the instructors were also changed in some of the courses. (Sharon)

I actually sent an email to the prof that was responsible for our last class and they've taken into account what I said. They're actually splitting up the classes.... So they're making it two courses because it was so demanding on all of us. And so that was really good. (Amy)

Another way these women challenge the authority of their institutions is through using unofficial or private channels of communication (Kazmer, 2002). Every program has its own CMS, which allows class members to communicate in various ways (email, discussion forum, private discussion spaces, individual

chatting) and some programs use other programs like Elluminate to facilitate audio and videoconferencing. However, in some cases, these women choose to use other ways to communicate. Debra used phone conferencing rather than online tools to communicate with classmates, as did Sharon: “when we had group work we would have a conference call. ...We tried one time doing the online messaging and you have things coming all over the place so we just decided to do a conference call.” Karen actively sought technology outside the institutional structures to explore and apply:

However, because of my love for experimenting with online technologies and social software, I often talked others into communicating by using a variety of open source and freeware technologies. I confess that I was usually the leader in such endeavours. My goal was to learn how to use these communication tools so that I could understand the end-user pros and cons of each. This enabled me to write about and teach others best practices in using these tools for educational purposes. (Karen)

Concluding Perspectives

While they all came from different backgrounds and had different experiences, the women in this study were influenced by the same discourses. These discourses shaped these women’s experiences in their academic and personal lives, thereby influencing their experiences as online learners. The discourses showed them how they were expected to behave as lifelong learners, superwomen, and computer users. Discourses encouraged them to pursue

education to improve their employability and for their own personal interests. They also told them what to expect from online learning and how they should respond to the authority of their professor and the institution they attended. Discourse shaped how they had high expectations of themselves as students and in the many other roles in their lives. Yet, they were not always prepared to conform to what their professors, institutions and families demanded. They sought ways to make their own decisions about their learning, to take action to bring about change for other students, and to shift responsibilities to other family members. Through the interaction of their actions and the discourses, tensions developed. In the next section, I will further explore the tensions these women experienced.

DOCTORAL STUDIES ONLINE: SHARON AND CYNTHIA

Cynthia

Program: PhD in Education (online) – completing her first year when interviewed

Personal situation: Age 52, divorced, two grown children and two grandchildren

Employment: Teaches part-time online for two universities

Previous/Concurrent Online Experience: previous experience teaching online and completed part of her bachelor's degree online

“I spent about a year looking, and decided on this university”

I loved everything I saw. I wanted to do a specialty in Education -- Educational Leadership with a Specialization in Curriculum and Instruction. It's one of the few programs that I found that had that kind of a very specific sort of focus. And I like the idea that their professors are all working teachers, and they're all out there, not just sitting in academic offices so that really attracted me to them.

Your doctoral degree should take about 3½ years, depending on how you move through it. Each class lasts 8 weeks, and you have 2 weeks off between each course. It's not really time off. It's 2 weeks to prepare for the next course. There are readings and you're expected to have done a certain amount of the work before you actually start the next course. So it kind of goes, it never stops. It goes year long.

The Canadian government just changed the rules last year. Any distance programs in the U.S. at any level, no longer qualify for tax exemptions for tuition. Plus I have to go to the States every year for residency, so none of that could be written off, either. So my last residency probably cost me \$6,000, \$7,000, so financially I really had to sit down and think. And unfortunately this information wasn't given to me when I started with them. The university knew about these issues, but they hoped they would have it resolved and it isn't going to be resolved, at least not in the near future. This is what Revenue Canada's decided, and so I'm in the process now of looking for a new doctorate program.

“The first 4 months or so were a really big learning time”

I really struggled that first 4 months because it probably wasn't 70 hours/week. I was probably doing 100 hours. Every article I had to read, every word I had to write, and I started thinking “oh, no.” The first two courses were exhausting because I didn't really know what was expected and I tend to be a bit of a perfectionist. Other students would have five references; I'd have 50. And I probably didn't have as many of these social/family moments as I should have had, so now I just make sure that I create those and that I allow myself to really be in those moments. My mom and dad are getting older. They need a little more, and I have to make time for that. So it's every second Sunday now, my whole family comes here for dinner. And that doesn't mean that there isn't schoolwork to do, that there aren't papers to mark. But once, I sorted it out, how important that is for my well being, then I realize it was kind of wrong to have

made the decision that there wasn't time for that stuff. It really is an illusion. There is time. But we create these ideas for ourselves to be the best student, to get the A, to get the scholarship, and we create a lot of stuff. We put a lot of burdens on ourselves that we don't really need to. This is what my head feels like sometimes. It's being all inflated and all prickly.

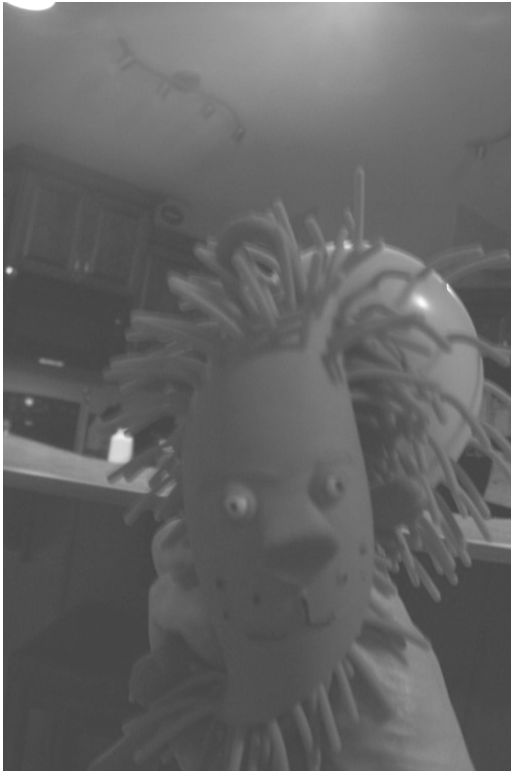


Figure 10. Cynthia's photo of a lion balloon.

So I figured those things out. I really have. That first 3 months in the program were way too hard and I thought, "I might not be able to do this." Because it was impacting on my life in every area, and I thought, "I don't know if this feels right." Then I realized it's not the program; it's me. It's how I'm viewing it. It's how I'm attacking. It's how I'm doing battle with it, and I shouldn't be doing battle with the education. It should be like a dance. It should be something lovely. So that's what it was - a shifting in a personal perspective

too, and saying “no, this just isn’t right. This is taking too much.” And that really helped once I realized it was me, and the way I was viewing the learning.

Instead of just doing great research and doing a great lit review and having all these other thoughts there but leaving space, which in itself is really the doctoral work, in a weird way. So once I started thinking “no, keep room for your own voice,” ‘cause I mean there are time limits on all the assignments. So that helped a little bit... Now, I put in way fewer references. I wouldn’t say “way fewer,” that would be a lie. Less references but I’ve thought more about developing my own voice in the work as opposed to just having piles of documentation. I’m leaving room in the work for my voice too, which I think is a good thing.

“My parents don’t care if I’m a doctor.”

The only one that cares that I’m going to be a doctor is me, and sometimes I wonder how much I care about it. Everybody else is perfectly happy with who I am, and I am too. That’s one of the things I struggle with because there’s an elitism about being in doctoral school that I don’t enjoy.

Sharon

Program: PhD in Education (online) – writing her thesis at the time of the interview

Family situation: Age 52, married, 3 children (13, 17, 21 when she started this degree)

Employment: VP of a college in a rural community

Previous/Concurrent Online Experience: No experience before starting this program, but is increasingly involved in online learning projects at work and has now done some online teaching

“You are kind of left out on your own”

This doctoral program has a blended format. There’s a 1-week orientation in year one, and then 2 weeks on campus in year 2. The first two years are course work, then there’s an oral exam and thesis writing. Each class has an Elluminate session with PowerPoint every week or two.

The Elluminate sessions brought people together and we were able to have group discussions. We were able to connect and learn from each other. I felt we had a strong cohort who were together for the two years. The cohort were interested in the topics—great discussions—sharing of experience—great group projects—focus and determination by its members.

The structure of the first two years was great. It kept me focused. When I finished my course work it was a bit of relief but then the connection with the students was completed. I would prefer to have had better supports from the

University for the two years of the research—you are kind of left out on your own. An experienced mentor in the writing process would have helped me. I am getting support from two coworkers who have just finished their Doctorates.

I'd like a little bit more push from my supervisor. But what happens when you get to the thesis: you do the research and you do the interviews. And now I need a block of time just to do the writing. I've decided starting Monday that I have another office in my area that I'm going to write from six a.m. to noon every day and then I'll do my paid work, in the afternoon. That'll work out good for me. If I write all day, every day I'd go nuts anyhow. So, if I can just get that mindset and get started again...

“You should never be in the first cohort”

We were in the first cohort. You should never be in the first cohort. It's a learning experience for everyone. The professors got carried away with wanting to have rigor so they had lots of readings. It was their first time offering an online PhD program so they were going to make sure that their rigor was the same as for an on campus program. They thought they had to *see* people in order to make sure that the rigor was there. One of the problems [was that] the people that were teaching weren't confident with the technology.

We, the guinea pigs, didn't get breaks during the summer between first and second year because we went continuously through April, May, June and then we had our week of summer classes so there was never a time where we weren't thinking about school. The second cohort got a break in the summer. Other

changes that occurred were that they had some separation between the sessions; fewer readings; more discussion; and the instructors were also changed in some of the courses.

“My children were able to see that you could attend without being at the university”

When I started my children were 13, 17 & 21. Because I was studying online, my children were able to see that you could attend without being at the university. I have a daughter who’s going to university in Thompson Rivers [a university in BC that delivers some courses online] but now she lives in Edmonton. She can finish her courses there through the online program. Maybe my son thinks I’m nuts. But they see that there is another way to learn, you don’t have to go to an institution. You don’t have to be a group, in a group of 30 or 300 students. And I think they think, “Well, if my mom can do it, it must be pretty easy.”

“With my laptop I could do it anywhere, and I did it all over the place...in Kazakhstan, in China, in Mexico, in Inner Mongolia, in Japan”

It was in the summertime, it was really hot and I’m sitting underneath a tree with my laptop finishing a paper. Then I go upstairs into my hotel and I send it. And I thought that’s pretty amazing to think that I’ve got it in before other people that are in the country.

I was staying at a Holiday Inn and was able to email my stuff. I could just write up my paper and send it off, or be part of a conversation. So there was never a reason why I couldn't be part of it. With my laptop I could do it anywhere, and I did it all over the place.

“In hindsight...”

I probably wouldn't have entered the program. It's a good program but your life just becomes a bit driven that way, and so you don't have much time to hesitate. My life has been so focused that I am tired. Because of my experience, I didn't really have to finish a doctorate to get ahead in my field. It has just been a long haul with working full time, and completing this degree was a bit much. I have learned a lot but if I had it to do all over again I just would not have put so much energy into doing the degree.

CHAPTER 6: TENSIONS EXPERIENCED BY WOMEN LEARNING ONLINE

In this chapter, I will describe how I identified tensions in the women's experiences. I will draw on the interview and focus group data to identify and explore some recurring themes that I feel merit further exploration: (1) blurring boundaries between home and school; (2) the cost of flexibility; and (3) multitasking, procrastinating and persevering as strategies for completing schoolwork. Before examining these themes, I will briefly describe how I identified tensions in participants' experiences.

I cannot talk about these women's experiences as online learners without also looking at the relationships between their employment and volunteer activities, their family and household responsibilities, their experiences and comfort with technology, their goals and expectations for academic achievement, their social lives and hobbies, and their motivations for pursuing online learning, which are further described in their individual narratives. Through reading about these experiences, readers are encouraged to identify and explore tensions. Often one tension is linked to several others creating complex webs of interdependent issues. Though these experiences are not necessarily shared by all the women, they are nonetheless significant; they are "strong and important for the insights they reveal" (Stalker, 2001, p. 295).

Identifying Tensions

The women in this study clearly experienced the feeling of being pulled in different directions while they were studying online. In addition to the tensions they specifically identified in response to my questions, it was clear they experienced tensions as they talked about their learning experiences. I identified tensions by examining the metaphors they shared and by looking at their feelings, particularly where they identified feeling guilty. In the next section, I will explore some tensions I identified, and readers are encouraged to examine the narrative vignettes between the chapters to further identify tensions in the women's experiences.

Feeling guilty was a recurring theme in the women's experiences, so much so that Rebecca joked that I should write a paper on that topic ("Jenna's next research project should be on 'Guilt and emotion in online learning!'"). These women felt that they were not able to give enough attention to the various parts of their lives. Some felt guilty about falling behind in their work (both at home and school), while others felt guilty for doing something that was for themselves rather than for the people around them or for not giving attention to other demands in their lives (like ironing or crying babies):

Your structure and routines sound so soothing... Part of me longs to have a schedule and adhere to it. Maybe it would make the competing demands seem more manageable. For me, though, I find that I'm inevitably behind and I end up feeling guilty about not keeping up with my schedule. These feelings of guilt mostly get in the way of action, so I end up making the

situation worse. I've been finding that winging it, while sometimes scary and overwhelming helps keep me feeling like I'm on top of most of my life's demands. (Jessica)

I felt guilty beyond belief when I was studying – because I was doing something for me, something I enjoyed, something that did not immediately transfer as a benefit to my family, friends or community. Call it the mother syndrome, or cultural conditioning that implies that women should give, not take. I don't know what it was, but I felt guilty when I studied. (Karen)

Guilt is a big one here – I don't tend to feel guilty about studying (years-long ingrained habit from childhood) unless the other areas of my life are actively calling for my attention. As I type, for example, my baby has been wailing away while my husband has been caring for her. I felt guilty about sending him up to get her while I stuck with my work. We both work in the evenings, so we kind of have a trade-off thing that allows us to send the other to the kids. Still, I felt like I shouldn't send him to do it. (Jessica)

The relationship between guilt and women using computers (Burke, 2001) and women studying online (Kramarae, 2001) has been explored by other authors. Feeling guilt illustrates the impact of conflicting discourses that shape women's roles at home, at school and at work. They are in a "double bind" (Gordon, et al., 2010, p. 86) where they cannot possibly achieve everything required of them by

the competing discourses of what makes a good mother and/or wife, a good student, and a good worker. Similarly, Edwards (1993) argues that women who are also students feel guilt because both home and school are “greedy institutions” demanding women’s complete attention and involvement (p. 62). She claims that guilt is a mechanism to ensure women remain loyal to both institutions. Feelings of guilt ensure that women are continually aware of their commitments to both their families (or partners, or homes) and their schoolwork.

The women in this study also share images and metaphors to describe their experiences. They use photographs and written metaphors and stories to illustrate the tensions in the experiences. Debra tells about how her life became a blur, much like an out of focus picture, while Barbara shares how she felt online learning provided flexibility, but only to a certain point:

Flexibility was indeed a factor in my choosing online studies. But even an elastic has a limit. We often stretch ourselves too thin. Online allowed me to put just that one more item on my plate. It was a real challenge, but in doing that, it allowed me to reach a point where I am now more aware of the need to prioritize and organize. (Barbara)

Similarly, in the following exchange between Jessica and I, she shares how the flexibility of online learning allows her to fit it into her busy life, but how there is always the risk of taking on too much:

Jessica: Here’s an analogy to help express how I see it. I am like a jar with limits as to how full I can be. Many of my commitments, such as family, housework and employment are like blocks in that jar. There are

only so many blocks that can fit in the jar before it's full. Then I go ahead and take something liquid, like online learning; I couldn't have added the program if it was just another block. Being a liquid, it fits in the spaces between all of the other commitments I have. This is a good thing because it would have been really hard to fit in another block (something else would have to be taken out). The trouble is that where there was previously air in my jar, I had space to breathe. Filling it up with liquid removes that space to breathe.

JK (Jenna): Another great image – though I worry about you drowning. Is that a concern? I wonder if it is a gender thing that women try to fill all of their space/time with activities. A lot of the advertizing for online programs seems to target women by suggesting they can fit one more thing into their busy lives. What do you think? Is this unique to women?

Jessica: It's true, drowning can be part of the picture. My coping ebbs and flows (more water imagery) and at times I feel as though I am drowning.

Blurring Boundaries Between Home and School

Learning online seems to blur the boundaries between home and school (Richard Edwards & Miller, 2000; Servage, 2007). It brings school into the home and, in some cases, into the workplace. Activities that previously occurred outside of the home, such as attending classes and meeting with classmates, are now

occurring in the home. While learning activities historically required that all students gather in classrooms, “physical presence at particular times in specific spaces is no longer central to pedagogic practice” (Richard Edwards & Miller, 2000, p. 128). With new technology increasingly allowing schoolwork to move into the home, the boundary between what is school and what is home is constantly shifting.

The dichotomies described by critical theorists of public/private and home/school, and sometimes school/work, are not as defined as these critical theorists may suggest. While Stalker (2001) affirms there are “tensions between women’s roles in the public sphere of formal, institutionalized education and their roles and responsibilities in the private sphere of the home and relationships” (p. 289), these women are experiencing more than just tensions. Some are experiencing their home life “encroaching and destabilizing and getting in the way of and distracting” them from their studies (Michelle), and some are experiencing “get[ting] lost in all the schoolwork” (Amy). In the following section, I examine the blurring of boundaries between school, home and work as women bring schoolwork into the home, as they find time and space for schoolwork, as they struggle to maintain distance between school and work, and as they study outside of the traditional classroom.

Bringing School into the Home

In some cases, the blurring between home and school is comfortable for the women who appreciate being able to control their learning environments

(Kazmer, 2005a). Being at home means learners can create a learning environment that suits their needs with all their resources accessible:

I love having my creature comforts. If the classroom's too hot or too cold I don't have to have those worries. I can adapt it. I don't have to go, be starving and find food on campus or pack a lunch. It's all here. (Nicole)

Now I'm very busy outside of the home but this is my little haven. This is my space. So I can put on some nice little quiet music. (Cynthia)

Furthermore, these women do not need to deal with the time and inconvenience of commuting or travelling to attend their classes:

When I did my Master's, I had to take a year off work, which I got partly paid for. And then for 4 months I drove two nights a week to [a community over 300 km away]. My son was two and so it was a little bit more stressful. ... I wasn't going to drive to [a bigger centre] anymore [to do my PhD]. (Sharon)

I love this. I love not having to travel to class. (Nicole)

DE [Distance education] saved travel time that would have been used in commuting f-2-f [face-to-face]. For two years, I travelled 200 km, 5 times a week to attend f-2-f classes. (Karen)

But in other cases, losing the clear distinction between home and school means the peacefulness and separation of home is replaced by the demands of

school. Nicole talks about losing the feeling of her home as a retreat: “because it’s becoming, during the school year, a place of work rather than a retreat or a place of solace.” Similarly, Cynthia shares how when her schoolwork gets very intense, and she is not leaving her house very often, her feeling of home shifts: “I had never done that before and I just realized I was almost, the house was almost becoming too much of a cocoon and too much work.” The way they feel at home and their feelings about how a home should feel are influenced by bringing school into the home. “Home” is no longer separate from the outside world, so it can no longer offer a retreat.

The blurring of the boundary between home and school can be stressful. It causes these women to feel additional pressure on themselves with their school and home responsibilities competing for their time and energy. This tension is not unique to online learners; some workers are also finding that while technology gives them flexibility and makes them more productive, it also makes it nearly impossible to separate home and work (Dholakia & Zwick, 2004). Women in this study describe how the distinction between home and school is blurred. Sometimes it feels like the schoolwork is interfering with their home lives by demanding space and resources while at other times, it feels like their personal lives are interfering with their schoolwork:

Basically every surface as well as the floor...I have piles going.... And they're not chaotic to me ... I know what each stack is and they can't be moved. So it gets to be a problem where ... you don't have a place to eat or walk and things like that. (Nicole)

For me home is where I associate schoolwork and ... when I am stressed, like I am right now... I leave it behind. I go out and I have an hour to myself. (Amy)

In both these situations, learning at home means that school and home are competing for time and space; both school and the home are “greedy institutions” (Rosalind Edwards, 1993, p. 62) which demand women’s undivided energy and attention. The lack of distinction between the two means that they cannot be separated and that one can be seen to be “encroaching” on the other. Over time, the comfortable “haven” of home becomes a contested space where school and home responsibilities place demands on the women, who cannot get away from either set of demands by “going home.” Women lose the privateness of their homes, and the associated sense of comfort and quiet. Mirchandani’s (1999) teleworkers found the same difficulty with establishing boundaries between work and home so they created separate spaces for work and home and rituals to identify the transition from home time to work time. The women learning online in my study did not always have the option of separating their schoolwork and home spaces. Similarly, Kaufman-Scarborough (2006) describes how workers need to adapt both their work and home schedules to accommodate both sets of priorities when they are working from home.

Finding Time and Space for Schoolwork

Within their busy lives, these women have to make room for studying both physically and temporally. As Castles (2004) states, “adult students need to

undertake a considerable amount of manoeuvring when they start studying” (p. 167). They make time and space in different ways; however, they do not always feel their situations are ideal. To make time for studying with minimal impact on their families while also completing their other responsibilities, these women work early in the morning or late at night, or both:

I study more at night. Little pieces at a time and then sometimes when I'm at the end, it's kind of crunch time so I'm doing a little bit more, but usually at night. Or sometimes I like to get up early in the morning and do some, but I work full time. So I come home and usually after dinner do a little work here and there. I try and space it out – say [I work for] half an hour and then I'll go do some stuff at the house [like] laundry and then back [to work for] a half an hour kind of back and forth just to keep the interest going. (Amy)

Well, I loved learning online, and I wanted, quite frankly the flexibility, because if I'm up at 3 in the morning, and sometimes I mark papers, or I respond to e-mails, and that opens up time to do a lot more of the family stuff that I want to do. (Cynthia)

I did most of my work on the computer probably early in the morning at 5 o'clock ... I only sleep 6 hours a night so that's kind of a bonus, and because that was an easier time for me to concentrate.... By the end of the night, I was too tired to really have a fresh outlook and so I just changed

my schedule from... nights to days. And so your days are a little bit longer but I found it very exciting. (Sharon)

What I was doing was never really understood by those closest to me. Comments like 'Mom is playing computer' or 'when are you going to be finished' unfortunately did not help me. My strategy became that I learned to work at night. It is a very peaceful time, and I found I could work well then, although I would eventually crash for a day every once in a while. (Barbara)

They negotiate their schoolwork schedules with family members:

During my first years of study, we only had one computer. We are connected through the phone line, and had a local Internet service provider (ISP) that allowed only so many hours of connection per day. I found myself perpetually negotiating computer time. We resolved some of the problem by getting another computer. They often wanted the computer right after school, so I waited until they were doing homework or in bed before I began my studies. On rare occasions my husband took the children outside, for short trips, or engaged them in some kind of activity while I madly raced to reach assignment due dates. (Karen)

My husband stays up a lot later than I do and so he would go online. So his MSN account (that was before Facebook) and stuff like that ... he would get in touch with his folks later at night. (Debra)

In addition to finding time for schoolwork, finding suitable study space is also a challenge. They seek a quiet workspace without interruptions:

I'd say I do like it to be quieter. And, if I know that if my environment isn't organized to a certain degree it is very distracting for me personally.

(Amy)

And I would go in [to work] on the weekends... because it just was time, quiet time for me to be able to think (Sharon)

Or, they want a space that is their own and a feeling of control:

Well I have my quilts... and it's kind of upstairs and away ... from everything, and I can go there and it's my place, you know... my space, whereas downstairs ... the TV is there and the treadmill is there and his computer is there and that whole thing, so. Yeah, I like having my own room, a room of your own. [But], I don't know if [my room] is far enough away. (Linda)

I enjoy being in control of my study place and time, too. I like to engage when I have time, not when someone else demands my time. Perhaps part of that comes from being a wife and mother – a role that is perpetually demanding. Having a lot of control over my learning somehow balances things out for me. (Karen)

They use laptop computers to give them more flexibility:

I probably do it on... my roommate's computer and now that I have the

laptop I can sit on the couch and do the work there. Sometimes I sit on the bed 'cause it's comfier and do work there. So I kind of move all around. I'd say I don't really have ... one particular place. But I think that also has to do with the living arrangements and how it's set up. If I had an extra room that I could just put my desk in that, I'd be set. (Amy)

And I did [my schoolwork] anywhere [with] my laptop... I might be downstairs in my house on my bed typing out something if there's too much action upstairs, or at work I could use my own computer. (Sharon)

I used both a laptop and desktop and preferred the laptop for its portability. When my modem stopped working at home, I took my laptop to the public library so that I could continue to do my course work. (Tracy)

And they use computers or office space at work:

It would appear that all the admin at work are gone right now so I have to be there. But, I've decided starting Monday that I have another office in my area that I'm going to write from six to noon everyday and then I'll do my work in the afternoon (Sharon)

Finding a suitable study space has an impact on other members of the household:

So this table and every other surface gets covered in my paperwork 'cause I print out a lot of stuff that either I'm writing on or there are comments ... I'll compress it and print it out... so I like to print out a lot of stuff and then plus there are course readings that come with it ... online as well as

in hard copy so I'm constantly going through those. I've got binders and notes and books I'm referencing and referring to. (Nicole)

I always studied downstairs in our family room, which is where ... the desk... and the computer and stuff is set up. And there was more ... space to spread out and ... my husband, of course, watched TV down there or ... listened to his music or whatever. So he was always doing that with headphones and... if he... made a little bit of noise I'd go, "but I'm focusing, I'm concentrating. You can't do that." (Debra)

And so sometimes my husband will want to be watching TV and then I can't concentrate to the sound of it I'm always asking him to turn it down... And sometimes I'll be working, I'll bring the laptop to another room but then [I] still hear these noises so it's just I guess the collision of entertainment and music and sounds and I guess being in a social place... Most of the time he doesn't [watch TV] anymore ... we found out pretty quickly that didn't work so he just knows not to. ...He doesn't even watch that much TV but if he really needed to see a special game or something then I'd move the laptop to another room. So I think he's compromised in that way to not turn it on while I'm working. (Nicole)

Finding time and space for schoolwork is a continual negotiation with members of their families and households to have access to shared computers or to have a quiet space to work (Kazmer, 2005a). In some cases, especially when

their children need the computer, these women's work gets pushed to late at night or early in the morning when there is less demand for the computer. In Karen's case, she even quit her teaching job so she could do schoolwork during the day when her family is away from home. Some women have resources to have their own workspaces or are in positions in their jobs, like Sharon, to make use of resources at work, but others find it more challenging to find the space they need. These findings reflect other research that reports that women tend to do their schoolwork later at night than men and at times that cause minimal interference with other family members' needs (Kramarae, 2001; H. Richardson & French, 2000), that women may try to hide their schoolwork from family members (Gouthro, 2004) and that women feel pressure to fulfill their roles as mothers and wives, regardless of the demands of their courses (Gouthro, 2004, 2009; Kramarae, 2001). While these women *are* able to fit online learning into their busy lives, it involves making decisions about whose needs take priority and about what they are willing to give up for school (Kazmer & Haythornthwaite, 2001). Their choices highlight power relationships in their families. The needs of the people around the women determine who has access to the computer.

Separation of School and Paid Work

All the women in this study talked about doing schoolwork, and sometimes paid work, at home. However, only Sharon and Debra spoke about doing schoolwork at their places of employment. Debra had long-term relationships with her employer and Sharon was in a position of authority that allow them flexibility in how they spent their time. While some women spoke

about having supportive employers who provided them with flexible scheduling (Amy), encouragement (Cynthia), and laptop computers (Debra) to support their learning, they did their schoolwork at home. This trend suggests school is moving into the space of the home more than it is moving into other areas of these women's lives. Interestingly, many of the women in this study were self-employed or worked from home (Cynthia, Nicole, Karen, Tracy, Barbara and Jessica) suggesting that paid work is also moving into the space of the home (Kaufman-Scarborough, 2006) in addition to school work which is already part of their home life. Other women described leaving their jobs or changing careers so they could pursue their online learning. In some cases their previous employers were unsupportive and in other cases the women wanted more flexible working situations to make it easier to study and work:

I planned my professional work schedule to facilitate success...I left a FT clinical position for part time teaching. (Cynthia)

So I was an editor, but that was too intense because not only was it more online in addition to my schoolwork but it was also more of the same, like just words and letters and typos and rephrasing paragraphs and too much of the same work. So that really didn't work and I was so physically sore from sitting like that so that's why I started to switch into the yoga. And before that I was a teacher but it didn't really overlap with my online program ... at one point actually with [a previous online program] when I was a teacher [the school] wouldn't allow me the time to go to [the on

campus orientation] for 2 weeks to start the programSo I actually quit my job because it's ... a big honour to be accepted to this particular program. (Nicole)

In the end, I quit public school teaching and took up online employment.

This resolved a lot of problems, as I was free to work online while the family was at school and work. I was able to do housework, make meals, and be ready to spend time with the family when they came home.

Financially, we suffered, but emotionally, it was the right choice. (Karen)

The responsibility for finding time, space and resources to study is shifted to the student (Richard Edwards & Miller, 2000), who may even leave their paid employment in order to pursue their education. The process of scheduling schoolwork confirms schoolwork is not considered a work activity and affirms “the assumption that private life [which, I would add, includes schoolwork] will be tailored to working life” (Oechsle & Geissler, 2003, p. 81). Despite their motivation to continue their education for career-related reasons, it seems that school is becoming, both in terms of time and space, part of their home lives. It is at home that most women are making changes to their schedules, responsibilities, relationships, priorities and physical space in order to fit their learning. Their families are inconvenienced by their schoolwork but, in most cases, their employers are not: for example, Sharon is still able to travel around the world for work, and Cynthia and the other women who work at home continue to meet both their school and work commitments. While their employers may benefit from the

skills acquired through courses, the investment of employers is minimal. And, in some cases, the employers' benefit is also minimal because they did not support these women who left their jobs or became self-employed in order to study.

Usher and Edwards (2007) state that learning, especially fast learning, is valued for economic reasons. It makes employees more productive, but it seems that online learning, which is usually completed at home, benefits employers by making learning an employee's responsibility and by ensuring learning can be added to already busy lives without taking away from productivity. It also causes minimal disruption to the family by allowing women to keep up their household responsibilities while learning. In these ways online learning allows women to take on a "third shift" (Kramarae, 2001) and maintain all their other responsibilities in addition to their schoolwork, to the advantage of both their employers and family.

Keeping Women at Home and Out of the Classroom

Taking studying out of the classroom and making it part of the home also keeps women out of on-campus classrooms. The women in this study generally appreciated the convenience of studying at home. They point out that studying online reduced the inconvenience of leaving their homes to study. This statement suggests that being away from home is an additional stress in their lives. Despite the mobility they have with laptop computers and wireless Internet access, most of these women continue to study at home, and often in the same place. They prefer to be at home, and it is easier for them to study at home. The other side of this statement is the assumption that women are more comfortable at home, or,

taken to a further degree, an expectation that women should be staying at home (Faith, 1988). Through technology, women can find themselves restricted to their homes in which case online learning can serve to isolate women in their homes.

By being at home, women become invisible students, unseen by their professors, but also unseen by institutional policy makers. In this way women learning online and their concerns, which are assumed to be of an individual or private nature, are not recognized as important (Mirchandani, 1999). Especially in institutions that offer both online and face-to-face programs, online learners may feel they are less supported and have less access to services. However, despite not being present on campus, they may find they are still expected to pay fees for services they cannot or will not utilize, or additional fees “for the privilege” of taking online courses (Fischman, 2009, July 27; Post, 2010). Or, as in Cynthia’s case, they may pay fees to travel to summer workshops, which are not recognized as educational expenses.

Studying at home also makes women, who are usually mature students, less visible in traditional classrooms. As a result, course materials and discussion may not reflect their experiences, and it is assumed that learners are of the dominant cultural group unless there is an indication they are not (May, 1994). The same is true of learners with disabilities who remain invisible in online contexts (Schmetzke, 1999, also see Olmstead, 1997 as cited by Schmetzke, 1999). Having women outside of the face-to-face classroom also makes their concerns and needs less obvious. Private concerns (like Karen’s broken leg) remain invisible to other learners and their professors. More importantly, the

arrangements that women make in order to be able to participate often remain invisible. For example, no one knows that Jessica has negotiated childcare with her husband but she still feels guilty hearing her baby cry while she's working. No one knows Linda cannot work where she can see the dirty dishes, and no one knows that Nicole feels the strain of her schoolwork in her body and in her sleep patterns. Professors and classmates are not confronted by the physical realities these women experience which can be made visible in the face-to-face classroom by women eating dinner in class, excusing lateness by explaining they had to drop off their children, or being visibly pregnant. Individuals and institutions can easily ignore that "women's obstacles cannot be overcome by dealing with women in isolation from the demands of those in their private spheres" (Stalker, 2001, p. 302). Thus, individuals and institutions continue to be allowed to assume that the flexibility of online learning will address the numerous systemic barriers to women's full participation in education. However, women studying online, at home, also offers advantages. While their physical absence from classrooms limits diversity in face-to-face settings, it also seems to empower women who are learning online because they feel more comfortable. Being away from the public view, they feel safer and more confident expressing themselves. Many of the women in this study describe feeling much more comfortable expressing themselves online:

I'm a little shy... I know not everyone believes that, but when it comes to a classroom setting, I would rather sit back and watch and listen... doing [my classes] online I was able to interact and talk with people and

totally express my ideas and not feel judged as much as if it was in a classroom setting.... And so in that sense it was really great for me. I was able to just sit and be ... “This is what I think about it.” Whereas in a classroom, I can just feel my heart starting to race and I probably wouldn’t say as much. (Amy)

In terms of social flexibility, I find it much quicker and easier to meet people online than I do face-to-face. I am more open because I feel safer. I am less hesitant to approach other students and talk to the professor. As a result, I have close bonds with a number of online students and professors, and share a business with a fellow graduate. (Karen)

Another aspect of online learning relates to the discussion forums. As a shy person in a typical class, I would rarely speak up or participate in the discussions. Even when I did, I would usually blush and feel flustered about having others’ attention directed toward me. For me, this was a frustrating experience because although I often had thoughts and ideas I wanted to share, I’d usually keep them to myself. The asynchronous discussions really allow for me to participate more fully and to feel part of the classrooms. (Jessica)

I have more restraint. I am able to remain someone silent as opposed to in a classroom when I feel I should speak even when there is actually no

need. I guess my passions get inflamed easily and I try to avoid getting carried away. I generally avoid conflict because I know that once I am engaged, I feel a tension inside me that I don't like. Online, I think I might stay calmer. (Michelle)

Jessica: Another benefit of the discussion forums is that I have the leisure of time to reflect and think about the discussions, then go back and add my thoughts if I have more that I would like to share. In an hour-long class, this wouldn't be the case. If something else occurred to me later on, I wouldn't have the chance to share it.

And Karen replied: I recall reading that a certain type of learner dominates f-2-f environments, while another kind tends to dominate the online one. It sounds like you [Jessica] and I hold back in the f-2-f environment, but feel more comfortable with coming forward in the online one.

These women feel they have more of a voice and are better able to express themselves in the online setting. Since voice can be used as a metaphor for power (Hayes, 2000b), the fact that women feel more comfortable and better able to express themselves online suggests they also feel they have more power in this context. The online context gives women more control over their learning and allows them to continue to look after responsibilities in their family and home, which mean they may feel more comfortable and confident in the online environment.

While learning the new technologies required for online learning was intimidating for some women, they soon acquired the necessary skills, which would further boost their sense of power in this environment. Though these women appreciate having more time to reflect and prepare their responses online, some also recognize that there is less time for exploring ideas (Servage, 2007). Cynthia, for example, describes how this impacts her in her classes, while Debra describes not having enough time to talk about things that were not about school:

There isn't enough time to teach [other people in class about my perspectives], to really explore how it's different [to teach in higher education].... You've got to get the assignment done. (Cynthia)

I didn't want to inundate my husband with my schoolwork and the few times that we did get a chance to talk, it was about things that we were missing out on. (Debra)

While none of the women explicitly stated it, learning online may have also made them feel more comfortable because they were in a group with peers. Debra, Sharon, Karen, and Linda described forming close connections with other students in their online classes, usually with other women, especially when these connections were strengthened by face-to-face meetings (Haythornthwaite, et al., 2000; T. L. Thompson, et al., 2007). In this way the online learning environment seems to support the needs of women learning online by providing an opportunity for accessible academic study and social interaction, which was lacking in face-

to-face settings for women like Karen who did not have time to socialize after class.

These experiences bring up the question of whether online learning is reinforcing boundaries by keeping women in the home or removing boundaries by connecting them with learners from diverse backgrounds without adding additional stresses of leaving their homes to attend regularly scheduled on-campus classes, which could require them to relocate their families, or commute short or long distances, or arrange time off work, or make arrangements for childcare and household responsibilities. But, there is a cost to the flexibility that comes with online learning, which will be discussed in the next section.

Invisibility of Schoolwork and of Homelife

Moving education into the home makes it less visible to other people. Studying online means that people around a learner (family members, co-workers, or the person next to her at the coffee shop) are not aware of what she is doing. This makes the learning seem less important and it gets less recognition. In Barbara's case, her family's lack of recognition of her learning leads her to keep it invisible to them by working at night, while Debra has to explain to her co-workers why she's been absent from the lunchroom. In other cases, the invisibility of online learning makes it easy for it to be pushed aside:

I think it's a bit weird too because it's not an obvious reason to say no [when my neighbours want to visit].... It feels rude over and over to say, "well actually I'm working" and how often can you say that, "I'm working?" (Nicole)

It can also be challenging for these women to find a quiet place to work when necessary because the people around them do not recognize they are working (Kazmer, 2005a). Linda says she would sometimes rather write than spend time with her family, but she does not tell them that. Barbara started working at night in response to comments from her family like “Mom is playing computer” and “when are you going to be finished” and Karen quit her job so she could do schoolwork during the day and still be available for her family in the evening. These women’s desire to keep their schoolwork invisible is an obvious contrast to the teleworkers in Mirchandani’s (1999) study who strive to make their work activities explicit and visible to ensure it is clear they are doing legitimate and valuable work at home. These women learning online do not seem to assign the same value to their schoolwork, as the teleworkers do to their paid employment. This contrast suggests that learning at home may be chosen because it remains hidden and less obtrusive, while doing paid work at home or going to face-to-face classes may be considered more legitimate activities than online learning.

The invisibility of women’s online learning again raises the question of whether online learning is improving women’s access to education or just making it easier to fit the learning into their lives with minimal inconvenience to others. Because it is not explicitly visible, it is easier for people to overlook and easier for the women to hide, if they want (Gouthro, 2004). Stalker (2001) argues that women work very hard to “[keep] the home a sanctuary, undisturbed by their busy and demanding lives as learners, by making their learning hidden” (p. 295).

However, Servage's (2007) work raises the question of why is learning not valuable enough that uninterrupted time is available for it?

While learning is invisible online, learners' other responsibilities can also become invisible in the online environment. In this way, "the actual conditions under which home learning take place remain, for the most part, a black box" (Servage, 2007, p. 563). The fact of studying at home and the reality of being at home are not always clearly acknowledged in online settings. Students are all logging on to the class from different locations. They do not share a common experience of "space" or "locatedness." One response is to deny that the students have lives beyond the confines of the CMS. The CMS environment becomes the confines of the classroom, and anything external to that experience is ignored. Some institutions and programs, particularly those that are cohort-based and/or offer face-to-face orientations or meetings, have recognized that students engage in learning for reasons beyond learning the content, so they provide social spaces within their online learning contexts. These spaces, sometimes called "Cafés" or "social forums," offer students the opportunity to socialize with their classmates by sharing things that are not directly related to their course content. These spaces allow students to acknowledge that there are other things going on in their lives. In some ways the online focus group I created was an alternative social space where women could acknowledge the tensions in their lives. In online learning settings, these social spaces are where students can acknowledge that schoolwork is encroaching on their personal lives and that their personal lives are encroaching on their schoolwork. They can acknowledge that neither aspect of their lives can

exist independently, and that each one is continually influencing the other. However, this space is often outside of the “learning” space of the course, students censor what goes in to each space, and in some cases, the social space is not used by students (T. L. Thompson, et al., 2007).

While Nicole speaks about an online space for students to talk about non-course related topics like breastfeeding and she shares how some of her classmates are offline to pick up their children at school, these concerns are left to the learners to address. It is not obvious to others what these learners are doing to fit online learning into their lives, and bringing up these concerns requires going to a specific “social” space outside of the academic context. This further segregates women’s non-academic concerns, despite their impact on their learning experiences.

The Benefits and Costs of Flexibility

Discourse of the Flexibility of Online Learning

The women in this study chose online learning and appreciated the benefit of flexibility in the time and location of their studying. Their expectations are shaped by the discourse of online learning that promotes online learning as “learning that can be accessed from anywhere, at any time, by anyone” (Kelland, 2005a, p. 131). This idealized view is presented through promotional materials and repeated by post-secondary institutions, the business community, and government organizations (Kelland, 2005a, 2005b).

Many of the women point out the benefits of having flexibility with online learning. Studying online allows the women to study while travelling for work or while being away from home. It also gives them flexibility to be available for their family members when they are needed. Learning online also gives these women the flexibility to choose when and where to do their schoolwork. Each woman has her own reasons for appreciating the flexibility of learning online:

That's one benefit -- the fact [of] the mobility. I'm here for part of it, [if] I have to pick up, [to] go to [visit my parents in another province], I can still do my class. (Amy)

It was a great program because I was able to take my courses from anywhere in the world. (Sharon)

But I could still do it because I didn't have to be in [another city]. I could do it in the evenings. I could do it on my own schedule as opposed to somebody else's schedule. I think that's what I appreciated the most. (Sharon)

If my daughter or my son, somebody needs me, the grandchildren need me, or my kids need me, I pack up my laptop and I go, and I can be somewhere for a week and still teach and still take care of all my commitments and it just makes life so much more rich, in terms of the important stuff. (Cynthia)

For me, what makes online learning flexible is the lack of scheduled classes, as well as the limited location demands. The fact that I am not physically required to be at a campus on a daily basis is what makes the program flexible. (Jessica)

So, to sum up, online learning provides maximum flexibility in time, space, place, media, social interaction and identity for me. (Karen)

Other women reflect the discourse that online learning makes learning more accessible to them. While they appreciate the flexibility of the program, in some cases they would not have had access to further education without the option of online learning because of family and work commitments or because they were not willing to move to another community to pursue their studies:

I chose to do it online because I wanted a quick in and out. I wanted to see what it was like to go back to school. And I thought to do a four year course by night would take me ten years. Right? And I couldn't afford to quit my job and go to school. And this was a way of getting that win, win. And when I say quick in and out, I don't mean in an easy way. I mean like when I start something I like to see an end. And this, this for me was palatable. (Debra)

I entered into online studies because I could not take the time to fit into the rigid schedule of the university just 10 minutes walk from home. (Barbara)

For me, the decision to pursue online learning was the best one despite all the challenges because it offered flexibility. I wanted to take a M.Ed. program at [a university in another province], but my husband enjoyed his work in [the province where we live] and wanted to stay. In the end, we decided not to move and I studied online. (Tracy)

It just gave me that flexibility and reassurance that I wouldn't have to quit halfway [if I decided to move] which didn't happen, I would just stick it through. But it makes it that much easier to do the course. (Amy)

It's just really high quality and it made sense to me that it could be low residency or non-residency or optional residency so that I could move 'cause at the time when I was applying we were in the States and by the time I started my first course we were in [another province] and by the time I started my first fall full year course we were living here. ... On one level actually I knew that it would give me something to stay grounded. ... I knew that I was going to be uprooted several times so I thought at least I'll have one thing that'll be a constant. And it has been exactly that. So that's been very cool. (Nicole)

Career-wise and financially speaking, I simply could not afford to pack up my family and move 1200+ km away to enroll in any full-time program.

(Karen)

When selecting programs, these women considered numerous factors related to accessibility and flexibility. They wanted programs that would reduce their travel time or that would not require them to relocate. They wanted programs with schedules that would fit with other work and family responsibilities. They wanted programs that would meet their needs and those of their partners and families. And they wanted programs that would not be disrupted by changes in their lives. By considering online learning as an option, they clearly embrace the discourse of online learning as being flexible and accessible.

Cost of Flexibility

However, there is always a trade off; there is a cost for the added flexibility of online learning (Servage, 2007). The flexibility of learning online does not mean that they have more time to complete everything they are doing. In fact, it seems that these women are trying to squeeze online learning into very small spaces between their existing responsibilities rather than having it replace other responsibilities, as Jessica described in her image of the water between the blocks in the jar. While they do give up some social activities and personal reading, these women still have significant responsibilities at home, at work and in their communities. It seems there is a belief that flexibility will make more time available in their schedules. Yet, some women found that their online learning actually takes more time or more effort than face-to-face learning:

Online (asynchronous) appears flexible because the choice of when to engage is up to the student. Deadlines still existed. I did find that it is

more time consuming because of the amount of independent study. This may be dependent on the program though. (Barbara)

If I can assume that the average graduate course is comparable to the average bachelor course, the online courses generally consumed less time than other DE [distance education] courses, but more time than f-2-f courses. However, courses that included student interaction (e.g. blackboard postings, synchronous virtual classes, etc.), could consume a lot of time, if I became quite active in discussions. (Karen)

[The university is] very clear that it's going to be a major time commitment: Forty to 70 hours a week. (Cynthia)

The assumptions that flexibility makes it possible to add education to an already busy schedule (Servage, 2007) or that online learning takes more time and effort than other forms of learning (Kramarae, 2001) are shared by other learners and researchers. However, learners in this study continue to believe that when they are able to choose how to use their time, they are able to work more efficiently and waste less time than in a face-to-face classroom.

While these women generally state that being able to study anywhere, at any time was one of the reasons they appreciate online learning, most of them do not take advantage of the flexibility of studying in different places. Unlike learners in other studies (Kazmer, 2005a), the women in this research usually study at home, with only a few exceptions. The greatest variety in location of

study came from having a laptop computer and wireless Internet access that allows them to move from room to room as they work on assignments. Some of the women do not have wireless (Nicole) or high speed Internet access (Karen), which further limits their options. These women usually complete their schoolwork at home, and in some cases they do most of their studying in a designated office space. While Sharon, who travels extensively for work, is the most significant exception, Amy was able to travel home during the summer to visit her parents, and Cynthia was able to work where she could support her children.

Personal costs.

Most of the women found they are studying in short bursts, late at night or at the last minute in order to complete their schoolwork. Again, the flexibility of studying on their own schedule only allows them to make their days longer and busier, adding what Kramarae (2001) describes as a “third-shift” to their existing responsibilities. Schoolwork still has to fit around their other responsibilities. While these women appreciate the opportunity to attend school without leaving their jobs, travelling to a school or relocating their families, they still need to make time in their lives for schoolwork. In some cases, they have to take time off from work to complete their schoolwork (Sharon, Amy) or use their vacation time to attend school (Debra).

In order to have this flexibility, these women give up their leisure time and social activities. While some workers who work at home lose their weekends and their family time and experience additional stress (Kaufman-Scarborough, 2006),

these women do not have the choice of completing their schoolwork at another time or place, nor do they get compensated for their time. Increased flexibility has an impact on their family relationships. It can increase stress and reduce time for activities that decrease stress (Servage, 2007).

Academic costs.

Some women felt that the online environment separates them too much from their professors. They miss the opportunity to interact directly with their professors and to receive immediate feedback

I think having a prof there in front of you, answering questions right away, ... I might have retained more, learned a little bit more of the hands-on tools. Rather than just doing it in the video and then getting feedback.

(Amy)

They also miss being present in the same space as their professors so they can experience the passion and enthusiasm of their professors:

I think the only thing I miss is sitting back somewhat passively during a lecture, taking notes, and 'drinking up' the information from the professor, preferably a passionate professor. (Michelle)

Some of the women feel that they would learn more or better in a face-to-face setting, but they are willing to forgo that contact for the flexibility of online learning:

I would have learnt more and I would have got more out of the course had I done it in person actually... [There was] definitely not enough hands-on.... I think it definitely would be better to do the course in person. (Amy)

I prefer face-to-face [learning] because of the social aspects. I miss that a lot...making new friends and really getting to know people. It doesn't really happen online. (Linda)

Learning online, because of the interruptions and competing demands, may actually impact the quality of learning, as well (Servage, 2007).

The flexibility associated with online learning does not automatically make it possible to fit learning in to an already busy life. There is a cost to that flexibility, which learners experience in terms of giving up some personal quality of life or some perception about academic quality. Additional tensions also arise for the women as they make their days longer and fuller. Servage (2007) explains this tension:

flexibility, however carries with it a significant paradox, for where flexible scheduling is perceived positively as a coping strategy... it also appears suspect in creating the very endless permutations of life choices it offers to manage. Is flexibility a postmodern disease, or a cure? We are left to wonder on the extent to which flexibility creates some of the very stress it is supposed to be addressing. (p. 562)

Strategies to Mediate Tensions: Multitasking, Procrastinating and Persevering

In order to complete their online learning, these women rely on recurring strategies: multitasking to address, sometimes competing, responsibilities;

procrastinating to avoid schoolwork and complete housework, and persevering to reach their goals.

Multitasking

Multitasking is a natural way of using time “to combine activities within the same time block, or to switch among two or more activities” (Kaufman-Scarborough, 2006, p. 67). Studying online seems to make it easier for learners to combine multiple tasks. Many of the women spoke about multitasking both online and offline:

When I was taking some of my courses, there was myself and another lady [I worked with who was also in the program] ... there's a little lab in the college [where] we'd have the computer with Elluminate going and we'd have another computer [each] so that if the class got boring, we could be multitasking, answering our emails. We use to laugh about it if anybody ever came in here... we'd have coffee and then we'd phone her husband and he'd go and get us supper... so we had quite the system going.

(Sharon)

I work best with many activities so multi tasking is not an issue for me.... I used to have my university pile at the front of my desk and then I had my other work things. And so if I had a break [or], I was tired of doing staff evaluations then I would take [the university] pile and do some of that.

(Sharon)

So I'm often multitasking like eating right beside my computer. ... Even though we made this rule that we wouldn't get food on it, it's deteriorated now because I want to get [my work] done. So I'm ... constantly having my breakfast at the same time... (Nicole)

I check my email regularly while I work; I open different sites; I look here and there. I never did that before. I would not have interrupted my work to listen to music or watch television or make a phone call. But online, it is all reading, for me at least. And it is all silent. I don't really break my concentration, but I am sometimes all over the place. (Michelle)

As Michelle says, it is easy to multitask on the computer. I listen to music, watch for emails, play a solitaire game, post to this blog, and download files for work at the same time. Right now I have 4 applications open, and am doing something with all of them. I cannot imagine splitting my attention that many ways in a f-2-f class - the professor would think I [was] rude. (Karen)

I am currently curled up on the couch, watching Olympic figure skating and catching up on posting. (Rebecca)

I didn't use a PDA, but I did buy an iPod so I could listen to lectures while I was doing other tasks. (Tracy)

Technology facilitates working on multiple tasks simultaneously or “dovetailing” on and offline activities (Kaufman-Scarborough, 2006, p. 68). This flexibility to multitask can make online learning disappear. When women are studying online while multitasking online (i.e. lots of windows open for school, work and personal projects) or offline (i.e. doing laundry, making dinner, watching children), the multitasking makes it less visible that they are studying. Their studying is not their only focus or even their primary focus. Working on multiple tasks at once, especially when there are potentially demanding technologies (cell phones, PDAs, etc.) and, equally demanding people (children, family members, neighbours, etc.), “the potential for interruption and task non-completion is high” (Kaufman-Scarborough, 2006, p. 69). Online learning seems to further emphasize blending of previously distinct aspects of the lives of women learning online.

Multitasking further blurs the boundaries between home and school, and private and public. Unlike Mirchandani’s (1999) description of teleworkers who create rituals to clearly separate working from home, these women learning online often allow, and even deliberately mix, the two areas of their lives. Mirchandani explains that the clear distinction between home and work reinforces the differences between the two and ensures that work is seen as different from, hence more valuable than, home. Most of these women do not appear to have either the physical or psychological separation between home and schoolwork that Mirchandani describes. While some of the women have (Linda) or would like to have (Amy) a separate area assigned to work, or choose to isolate themselves

(Rebecca) or leave (Sharon) when work is more demanding, many of the women integrate schoolwork and home into the same time and space, which is often also shared with other family members.

Procrastinating

The relationship between schoolwork and household chores (cooking, cleaning, laundry, yardwork...) remains complex. Most women seek ways to integrate housework and schoolwork, either through taking breaks from one to work on the other or by doing both at once. Yet sometimes these women describe doing housework as a form of procrastination from their schoolwork:

When my studying isn't going well, it's easy to switch to work (which is also online), put in a load of laundry or call my husband or friends at work. (Tracy)

Sometimes I was my own worst enemy - sweeping the floor instead of studying. I hate housework - so why was I sweeping the floor? (Karen)

There's the mundane things of life that get in the way. Now that I'm at home and not working and my husband is smack-dab in the middle of his career. So these chores fall to [me]... and sometimes I find they're an excuse too. I think, "Oh, I should go do that assignment" but I should [be cleaning], and so there is that whole tearing. (Linda)

And so I find either I procrastinate enough that I have to clean the whole

house and make sure it's totally clean, everything done and then do my work. (Amy)

So it works both ways... the place just looks like a total sty and I don't want to take time away because you hear all these stories about people saying, "Don't answer the phone. Don't clean." It's easy to start cooking to procrastinate your own work. So I have this thing in my head that if I let myself do any of those external things that I'll be procrastinating so I'll put off all those things. (Nicole)

As a result there is tension caused by the pull to do schoolwork and the pull to do housework. This tension between schoolwork and housework is interesting. It makes me wonder why these women put so much pressure on themselves both at home and at school that they feel pulled to do housework when they feel they should be studying and vice versa. It seems that their housework may have to become a procrastination technique in order to justify doing it when there is schoolwork to be done. Since most students procrastinate some of the time (Zarick & Stonebraker, 2009) and since, to many students, it is perceived as part of the process of completing schoolwork (Schraw, Wadkins, & Olafson, 2007), by labelling housework as a procrastination technique it becomes an accepted, if distracting, part of their schoolwork process. In this way procrastination can be a productive motivational strategy (Chu & Choi, 2005). Embracing housework to avoid schoolwork could be a way of trying to do everything instead of involving other family members or lowering standards. This incorporation of housework

into schoolwork may be one way in which “women must ensure that the private sphere is unshaken by their absences” (Stalker, 2001, p. 300). Both schoolwork and housework can become “legitimate reason[s]” rather than excuses for working on a particular task (Rosalind Edwards, 1993, p. 71).

This tension between schoolwork and housework also reflects what Mirchandani (1999) describes as the constant need to “protect” the public sphere activities from “the threat of nonwork” (p. 96). By blending schoolwork and housework, these women may be further incorporating their learning into the private sphere. When schoolwork and housework co-exist, schoolwork loses its connection to more valuable public sphere activities like work. Instead, it becomes one of the many less valuable “nonwork” or housework tasks that women perform.

Persevering

Women in this study found ways to make their learning fit into their busy lives and schedules. It was not always easy. It required examining and changing priorities, deciding what activities they wanted or needed to keep and which ones they could give up, and giving up responsibility to other family members. However, knowing that their programs had a finite timeframe helped to make these decisions more manageable. The women also looked forward to the end of their programs, and returning to their regular activities.

The women in this study made decisions about what was important to ensure they could meet the standards they had set. As previously discussed, they are aware of the high standards they set for themselves, but they also try to be

realistic about their expectations for themselves as students and in their other roles.

Some women made decisions to remove activities from lives to make room for school (Kazmer, 2002). They did not like to make these decisions, but they justified them because their schoolwork was important to them. These were often social activities and leisure activities:

Do you do a lot of social things? No.... And so probably that whole leisure time thing just goes out the window. (Sharon)

I have family in Saskatchewan... everybody goes back in the summer and I just didn't ... juggling everything ... I can't do those things. (Sharon)

I love taking care of my plants and re-potting them and moving them around. It was really frustrating in the spring when I didn't have time ... to get started and start things from seed as opposed to buying the full potted plant. I really felt it aching ... I really wanted to just spend ... a few days out there getting it started... (Nicole)

So these are flowers from home. ... When I'd go upstairs at night I can look out and see this from my bedroom. And I would go, "Wow, those roses look beautiful." But, I never really had a chance to enjoy them or see them ... And Mom's lilac tree, it's a white one, ... and I never saw it bloom. It just went by. (Debra)

There were lots of times when folks would call us and say, "How about coming for a barbecue?" And I would say [to my husband], "Just go." And I would stay home. (Debra)

I love quilting. And I do quilts for everybody in the family and quilts for myself and quilts everywhere. And I love that and since I've started this book and [I've decided] it's time to get serious. Well when I get serious, then the quilting goes by the way... and now I'm craving quilting. (Linda)

Things like down time with my husband and me-time get pushed to the side. For example, I'd like to cuddle and watch a movie with my husband tonight, but the reality is that I have work to do... (Jessica)

It was my marriage and my personal time that I sacrificed for the roles of mother, housekeeper, cook, schoolteacher, seamstress and student. (Karen)

[It is important to me to be] able to give enough time to the relationship ... and also being focused enough to think, "Oh, I actually need to do my assignment." Especially since it's such a new relationship I always want to go out and do different things ... and sometimes I have to remind myself "OK, I have work to do." So I that was one thing I had to kind of remind

myself about [my schoolwork] ... there's so many other things that we can do. (Amy)

Kazmer and Haythornthwaite (2001) found that online learners would make decisions about what activities, commitments and expectations they would reprioritize when they were studying. They found that learners would give up the following activities (in this order) to make room for schoolwork: (1) personal leisure, (2) social leisure, (3) volunteer work (though school seems to be a substitute for volunteer work for some students), (4) classes, work, sleep, eating, and (5) family (children are always a first priority) and expectations for marks.

However by removing these social and leisure activities from their lives to make room for schoolwork, these women were also reducing their opportunities to separate themselves from their school activities. Activities that they would have relied on to help them get a break from paid employment and reduce stress, were some of the activities they decided to give up to make room for their schoolwork. Giving up leisure time and increasing isolation, which these women learning online experience, are actually arguments *against* increasing flexibility in workplaces by allowing employees to work from home (Kaufman-Scarborough, 2006).

In some situations, women made decisions to maintain outside activities or add activities to their schedules to find a better balance between school and other activities (Kazmer, 2002). For example, Nicole added participating in more yoga classes to her schedule until she started to teach classes. Similarly, Debra makes time for going to the gym early in the morning. When adding activities to their

lives, they considered whether it was a justifiable addition, whether it supported them in completing their schoolwork:

I've learnt that I really need to be outside a certain portion of every day so I dug up a lot of my back yard and I'm out there digging a lot. That's a personal thing. I've started in the last 6 months, making myself go to the gym. I go four times a week now, and I had never done that before. I've got to expand myself out too [by going to the gym and working in the yard]. So I've started doing those types of things for myself, which is really helpful. (Cynthia)

I have a bridge club and there's eight of us. And we met every second Tuesday.... And there were lots of times that I didn't get [to go] ... [But when I was able to go,] it was quite relaxing and a bit of a reprieve because [the women I play with are] a great group of people and they kind of just made me forget all [my school concerns]... All of a sudden I'd just forget it. (Debra)

Other women felt that some activities were too important to give up:

I was fortunate that my kids were older, my son was in Grade 9 and my other daughter was finishing high school. But I still attended all their [activities], -- they weren't in a lot of activities thank goodness -- but I was still able to participate...because [I could] do [my schoolwork] online and [I could] do it at midnight. (Sharon)

I'm an avid volunteer and community supporter, and I always have been. I always made time for that. Always.... The meetings for the United Way were Tuesday mornings. They would start at 7:30 [a.m.] and be over at 9:00. (Debra)

Sometimes, their busy lives did not leave room for extra activities, so they set things aside, for a few hours while working on assignments or for the whole length of their programs:

I didn't do the regular check ups - eye, medical, dental - as it was just one more appointment and time thing to connect with. So I wasn't as diligent as I should have been. (Sharon)

I'm not having full regular meals every 3 or 4 hours... I'll go long stints and not realize how much time's gone by... sometimes the quality of the food [isn't good]... [I'll eat] crackers and hummus instead of like a whole full meal. (Nicole)

But I love reading what I want to read. And I didn't the first 4 months I was in the doctoral program... (Cynthia)

Other times, they gave other family members responsibilities so they could focus on their schoolwork:

And the other stress for me was a three and half hour time difference between here and my family.... My parents are aging and in order to talk

to them [my husband] did it for me. [He'd] say, "She's studying but she just wanted me to check in and see how things were going." (Debra)

In order to cope with the demands of the program, the women made agreements with themselves. They were able to handle the challenges of learning online because the situation was finite:

I felt pulled sometimes in [my] work when [I was] in the midst of taking courses... are you giving a 100% to your work? So you kind of feel, over[whelmed]... sometimes feel as if your house doesn't get as clean as you would like it to be because you just can't do everything. So I think you have a real push/pull. But if you keep looking at the end goal, that it's only 2 years. (Sharon)

So that's why I chose online, I think. I knew there was a beginning and an end. I knew it was something shorter... yes [our lives were] going to stop for two years... and then we'd be able to pick up and move on. (Debra)

I wouldn't advise working 70 hours a week on school ... I wouldn't. I don't think anybody can do that indefinitely. Nor would I want to. (Cynthia)

Having a finite program, also meant the women could look forward to the end of their program. They had things to look forward to when they finished their schoolwork:

So [this picture] is a collection of my leisurely reading that built up. And the first thing I did last year [when I finished my program] was [say], “Oh my God, I can read.” I think I picked up the sluttiest book and read it. I don’t even remember which one. It was ...fiction... So getting back into some real reading, I’m really enjoying that again. (Debra)

Concluding Perspectives

The women in this study experienced tensions as they pursued their online learning. Through the interviews and focus group, I was able to identify some common themes in women’s experiences. First, they experienced boundaries between home, school and work being blurred as school, and in some cases work, moved into the time and space of their homes. Sometimes they appreciated the convenience of learning at home, but at other times they felt they could not get away from the pressures of their schoolwork. Second, they realized that flexibility was a benefit of online learning, but it required trade-offs. The added flexibility did not necessarily mean that they could fit online learning into their lives without losing time for personal activities or giving up what they wanted academically. Third, these women relied on three recurring strategies to fit online learning into their lives: multitasking, procrastinating, and persevering. Having identified and explored these tensions and some strategies for mediating them, in the next chapter I will examine some of the theoretical implications of these findings.

STUDYING WHEN RETIRED: LINDA

Linda

Program: Non-credit writing courses (2 in the year prior to interview)

Family situation: Age 65, married, 3 children, 10 grandchildren and 3 great-grandchildren

Employment: Retired

Previous/Concurrent Online Experience: Taught distance education courses, husband completed an online program

“Why am I doing this?”



Figure 11. Linda's photo of a lodge.

This is my overriding reason and my overriding belief that one needs to keep their mind active and busy or they'll end up there – in a Lodge. I know that sounds really bizarre but it sort of came to my mind. I went, “Why am I doing

this?” Here I am retired, and I really enjoy what I’m doing, but I also believe strongly that you have to exercise your body, exercise your mind, otherwise it’s game over. I’ve watched a lot of my relatives do nothing and sit around and rot when they’re in their sixties. So, I don’t want to do that.

“It’s the jungle of technology that ticks me off.”

Online can be aggravating. I don’t know how to put this, it’s a thing of technology. There’s just so much to know about technology. Sometimes the system is down and that’s frustrating. When Telus is down, it pisses me off.

“I felt ganged up on with the Mac.”



Figure 12. Linda's photo of her husband's computer.

This is a picture of my husband’s computer. He just decided out of the

clear that I wasn't going to have this computer anymore, that he wanted it and that I should like to be on a Mac. He said it was because a Mac is much better for a writer. My stepson is a computer programmer. He and my husband kept telling me over the course of 8 months that I should consider a MAC. I kept saying I was happy with what I have. I really don't want to change. I'm just not into that. But they bought me the new one anyway. At Christmas here comes the new MAC. They just wanted me to have a MAC, which took me off the other computer so they could have it to play around on. So I wasn't impressed with this new computer. The old one is what I know. I know that system really well and on this new computer I did not know anything. That kind of put me off too. I thought, "Well what the heck is this?" Supposedly you can do a lot more interesting things on a Mac. Well, I don't know. I said, "thanks a lot you guys, you're going to now put me on this and I'm going to have a problem." But, I have to admit I did not have any problem. If you want to know the truth I have noticed a difference with the Mac - I have to do things differently. My husband says, "Well change is good for you." OK. Whatever, we'll change *you* if you want. However I am okay with it now. He finally went out and bought Word for Mac so I am a bit happier.

"That's why online"

I moved around a lot and then I came to live in a small town and stayed there 30 years and all my friends are there. Then suddenly my husband got a better job and here he moves me to this city. I just think because I was too nervous about driving around the city but I needed something to do because I was

really not feeling good about the space I was in. So I needed to do something that kept me moving and kept me doing what I needed to be doing.... And I took some other courses at [the university] that weren't online. So that was an impetus to get going and do something. In the winter it's hard for me running around the city, I'm a chicken. That's why online. It's because I have the computer and it keeps me in the house. That worked for that time.

Now I prefer to take an online course because I can work on it in the middle of the night and don't have to go out in the winter, night, etc. I don't have to figure out parking downtown or at the university.

“What is the importance of what I do?”

That's the biggest tension that I have wanting to do things for myself versus doing things for other people. That's huge for me. My personal life gets mixed up with my learning life. I end up doing all the personal things for everybody else and then I think there's a pulling -- shall I go and do my learning which I need to do really for myself, or do I all these personal things for everybody else?

I think my family (but not my husband) doesn't see my writing or my courses as all that important when they want me to meet their needs like when they need a ride to the doctor, babysitting etc. They always tell me in words, that they think it's neat that I am writing and studying “at my age.”



Figure 13. Linda's photo of her ironing.

I think that's been a big issue with me: what is the importance of what I do? My husband needs his shirts ironed for work and I think what I'm doing isn't as important as what he's doing because he's earning money. Therefore, I need to assist his process of earning money. So I watch TV and I iron shirts, and then I watch TV and then everything goes by and I don't end up doing what I should. I end up doing my course, I end up doing writing, but probably not as much as I want, and I think it is based on the idea that what we do at home as women is less important than what they do out there. So we're always trying to assist.

My husband is supportive by never putting any demands on me for anything. I luckily have a spouse who says, "don't worry about it, just do what you need to do. What you're doing is important." He's very supportive. He's all for my taking courses. He is always pushing me to do more courses or go write. So it's not like I'm getting harassed by him because I'm not doing other things. I do wonder what he would do if I wrote all the time and never did any of the house

things. Actually, he would probably do the housework and not say anything. It is really the pressure I put on myself that stops me sometimes from doing more writing or studying.

I think the house stuff is usually unique for women. I think men get pulled more from job, spending time with family...not so much with the cleaning stuff. I only have my granddaughter as a measure of the youngest generation...I think they don't care about the cleaning, job, thing, they care about socializing and partying and that would be their diversion. With online learning, I can do stuff for others and do my classes at other times. Don't know if anything really addresses the tension. It will always be there. Whenever we are drawn to do something for ourselves we get pulled in another direction.



Figure 14. Linda's photo of her dishes.

CHAPTER 7: THEORETICAL ANALYSIS: CHALLENGING UNDERSTANDINGS OF MULTIPLE SUBJECTIVITIES AND POSITIONALITIES

In this section I will examine my findings through a lens of poststructural feminism in order to provide a theoretical analysis. Specifically, I will use the concepts of multiple subjectivities and positionalities to explore what my research adds to existing theoretical understandings of these concepts by examining them in the context of women learning online. I will first present my understanding of these concepts by drawing on poststructural feminist theory. Then I will examine how my understandings of invisibility in online settings and of the universal online student can be conceptualized using these concepts and how they challenge theoretical notions from poststructuralism. I will also look at how postsecondary institutions respond by using flexibility as a way to address learners' needs. I will finish by looking at my research using critiques of poststructural feminism, namely the challenge of creating a foundation for action.

Defining Multiple Subjectivities and Positionalities

Poststructural feminist understandings of multiple subjectivities and positionalities are connected. Though subjectivity is related to identity, and positionality is related to power; each one influences the other. Poststructural feminists recognize that women's experiences are shaped by the interaction of numerous factors that are unique to each woman, based on her cultural

background, age, ability, socio-economic class, family structure, and sexual orientation. Women's identities are shaped through the interaction of these subjectivities within their individual experiences. In other words, the multiple subjectivities form women's sense of who they are and what their roles are in the world in which they live.

While some theories for understanding women's experiences focus specifically on gender and try to create a common understanding of what it means to be a woman, theories of multiple subjectivities acknowledge and integrate the different subjectivities that shape each woman's experience. Poststructural feminist perspectives contest liberal feminist perspectives that foreground gender while ignoring other forms of oppression as well as Marxist feminist perspectives that examine gender and class, but exclude other forms of oppression (Tisdell, 1995). By including multiple subjectivities, the experiences of women cannot be essentialized into a universal white, middle class, able-bodied, heterosexual woman. In this way, the experiences of women become much more diverse. As women move through the world, they experience shifting as their "precarious, contradictory and in process [subjectivities], [are] constantly being reconstituted" (Weedon, 1997, p. 32). Thus, women's multiple subjectivities are fluid and continually changing.

Furthermore, when we consider multiple subjectivities, the experiences of women become more complex. Women are constantly negotiating the often competing influences in their lives. They have family, work, and community commitments that shape their experiences – and women learning online add

education to that mix. The result is a complex interaction between all of these responsibilities and the subjectivities that produce each woman's unique situation. Multiple subjectivities definitely help to describe the complex and varied lives of the women in this study. No two women have the same backgrounds or experiences learning online. For example, Sharon is studying online at the doctoral level. Her experiences as a student are shaped by her background (age, ethnocultural background, gender, etc.) by also by her job as an administrator in a postsecondary institution, her subjectivity as a mother of three children including one who is studying online, her involvement in her community as a volunteer, her previous experience as a graduate student commuting long distances to complete her studies while her children were young, her decisions about how involved to be in her son's school activities, and by her co-workers who are also pursuing graduate studies. All of these factors influence her understandings and experiences of learning online.

Related to the concept of multiple subjectivities, which define individual understandings of self and the world around them – in other words their identity, is the concept of positionality, which is where individuals are located within “multiple systems of privilege and oppression” (Tisdell, 1995, p. 61). Positionality describes an individual's perceived or real power within a specific context at the intersections of different networks of power. As their multiple subjectivities interact, individuals have different agency to act on and in their environment, which is described as their positionality. hooks (2000) uses the image of the margin and the centre to explore positionality: “to be in the margin is

to be part of the whole but outside the main body” (p. xvi). Individuals’ positionalities change as they become more “conscious of how structural systems of privilege and oppression inform [their] identity and behavior” (Tisdell, 2001, p. 275). As individuals learn more about their positionalities, both their identities and their power to respond to their positions change, with each influencing the other.

Positionality is a useful concept in understanding women’s experiences learning online. Their position within systems of privilege and oppression in online learning contexts depends on the subjectivities described above, but also on the type of Internet access they have, their ability to communicate in writing, their familiarity with and skill in using Internet-based communication tools and online learning interface, their ability to work independently, their familiarity with institutional structures and expectations, and their capacity to organize their time and space to meet the course requirements. Each woman’s relative power within the online classroom setting will be influenced by their subjectivities and how these play out both on and offline.

Positionality, like subjectivity, changes based on the context as women move their lives on and offline. Cynthia, for example, identified how she shifted from being a respected online teacher, to being a student with no recourse when she felt she was being treated unfairly by a professor, to being a grandmother learning with and from her young grandchildren, to being an international student whose educational decisions were influenced by government tax regulations, to being a daughter who was valued regardless of her educational level. In each

context she was positioned differently in terms of her relative privilege and oppression.

Together, subjectivities and positionalities can be imagined as strings that weave together. The subjectivities form the foundation for an individual's understanding of the world; in places, the strands will be woven closely to form a strong and stable web, but in other places the strands will knot or pull in different directions to form bunches and holes where different subjectivities are contradictory or in conflict. Cynthia, above, would experience the strength of her web in regard to her position as a 'respected online instructor' and as 'a daughter who was valued, regardless of her educational level.' She would also feel the fragility of the strands as reflected by her vulnerability of being a student, both in regard to feeling she had no recourse in a conflict with an instructor and in regard to the effect of government tax decisions. The strand formed by her position of grandmother would weave in and out through these other strands as she shared the experience of her grandchildren. The result is sometimes a strong stable weave that will support examination, action and external pressure, and in other situations, a weaker weave that will stretch and possibly break when external forces are applied to it.

Invisibility Online

In online contexts, we need to reconsider the concepts of subjectivity and positionality. Subjectivities are often associated with visible traits like race, gender, age and ability. Likewise, positionality is associated with visibility; that which is visible is acknowledged while that which is invisible is not. When

difference is visible, it is easier to acknowledge and address, but when it is not obvious, it can be ignored or overlooked. Returning to the analogies of the woven strands, the strength and beauty of the individual patterns come from seeing them. If they are only described or imagined or assumed to be a particular way, then they are not necessarily going to be fully appreciated. Similarly, strands can be strengthened by weaving together, as in the case where finding commonalities with others can strengthen individuals' positioning within a group. When learning moves online, many of the traits that shape subjectivities and define positionalities become invisible.

Online learners often remain invisible or hidden from each other due to separation by space and time. While the learners may have briefly met in person, they are rarely physically present in the same space at the same time. In some programs learners attend mandatory or optional face-to-face orientations or summer programs. In other programs, learners connect using audio and/or videoconferencing technology where they can talk, and sometimes see each other, in real time. However, during most of their studies they are separated from each other. Online learners may have images of their classmates from these face-to-face encounters, but they still interact primarily in a text-based environment.

In the absence of physical observation to contradict assumptions, learners and instructors will make assumptions about users based on the information they have. Amy, for example, describes her classmates as having a wide range of ages, and she thinks that some of her classmates were closer than others:

Because I can see other people's postings and I could kind of tell the way they talked to each other... The language they were using with each other, I could tell that they were a little more comfortable with [each other], and had chatted with [each other] more. (Amy)

Online learners, who are separated from each other by distance, will make assumptions about their classmates based on information they have about them: other students' names; photos, images or avatars other students use to represent themselves; personal details that students provide (ages of children, year of graduation, marital status, job title); references to spouses, partners, or family members; research interests; statements they make in class discussions; writing style and ability; frequency of contributions to class discussion; and other conscious and unconscious observations.

Likewise, learners will make assumptions about themselves in relation to their classmates. For example, I was a M.Ed. student in a program that required two years of work experience as a prerequisite. I started my graduate studies, a year and a half after finishing my undergraduate degree, so I was convinced I was the youngest and least experienced (and by extension, least capable) student in my online classes. In my face-to-face classes, I could more easily assess my skills in relation to the other students because I could see them as individuals with their own strengths and weaknesses academically.

Invisibility online is also related to positionality or power within the online learning context. While "popular imagination would construct cyberspace as a culturally inclusive, colour-blind utopia" (Doherty, 2004, p. 3), the reality is

that online learning environments, like other online contexts, are gendered, raced, and classed. Therefore in online interactions different groups will be feel more comfortable and will find their needs more easily addressed in the context. For example, as previously discussed, online learning environments tend to be developed, administered and maintained by men. Therefore, these environments are likely to be more responsive to the needs of men than to other learners.

Whereas in face-to-face settings, learners could feel safer by recognizing classmates from the same ethnocultural background (Tisdell, 1998), or seeing other shared characteristics, online those traits remain invisible (Kolko, Nakamura & Rodman, 2000; Kramarae, 2001). In face-to-face settings there is also the risk that being recognized as different from the dominant group can result in isolation, or “othering” (Hayes, 2000a, 2000b; Tisdell, 1995). This “othering” can move online where assumptions about learners can lead to isolation. From my experience ethnocultural background is not acknowledged in online learning settings unless it can be assumed that someone’s ethnocultural background differs from what is expected by others (May, 1994). This type of assumption could be made based on a name, an interest in issues related to diversity, or a learner’s English language skills. Otherwise, it would likely remain unacknowledged, and students and instructors would be making their own assumptions. Unless there is information to contradict their assumptions, I think students are assumed to be part of a fairly homogenous group: white, Canadian-born, heterosexual, able-bodied, etc. As a result, students who feel excluded or silenced in the online classroom have the options of “outing” themselves by clearly stating that they are

different from the group (Kramarae, 2001), or trying to blend in so they do not appear to be different from the group, or remaining silent. Since research about online social interactions affirms that anonymity and lessening of inhibition can lead to expressing anti-social viewpoints it can be particularly risky for students to highlight differences which can then lead to their perspectives being silenced (Suler, 2004; P. Wallace, 1999); however research about online learning contexts suggests that learners will consciously moderate their comments to avoid “negative emotion” (Conrad, 2002, p. 203).

In this research, invisibility and distance in online learning contexts impact positionalities in different ways for different students. Some students valued invisibility and distance, which allowed them to feel more confident expressing themselves in class discussions without feeling they were being judged, while other women felt frustrated and unsupported in their learning due to feeling invisible and distant. These contrasting responses highlight interesting aspects of subjectivities and positionalities. For example, Karen felt that her decision to learn online gave her a certain sense of power. She felt comfortable with the technology and she consciously set goals for herself to ensure she got full value from her courses. Amy found that learning online made her feel more confident than she did in other learning contexts because she had time to prepare written comments and she did not feel pressure to speak in front of a group. Both of these women found that online learning put them in a position of power in the learning context. Other women felt they had power in other areas of their lives because of learning online. They were better able to balance their responsibilities

because of the flexibility allowed by their online courses. However, Linda felt the technology left her dependent on other family members for help, and Cynthia felt the policies of the institutions she attended were not supportive of students. The different reactions of each woman confirm that their positionality in the online learning context is influenced by their unique subjectivities.

Clearly, the theories of poststructural feminism do not adequately address what happens to subjectivities and positionalities when they are hidden by technology. Some research examines how individuals in online social contexts may experiment with gender switching or creating different identities (Kendall, 2000; Kolko, Nakamura, & Rodman, 2000; Turkle, 1995) or challenging traditional roles (Kelly, Pomerantz, & Currie, 2006), and other research looks at what happens to strengthen characteristics that conform to group identities in online social groups (Kendall, 2000). However, the theoretical analysis of what distance and invisibility do to understandings of subjectivities and positionalities in online learning contexts needs to be further developed.

While physical observation is not necessarily going to provide information about all of the multiple subjectivities that shape a woman's experiences, it provides some clues about her background, such as race, age, and ability. In the absence of this information, it is easier for students, instructors and institutions to make assumptions about their students. Based on observations from my research, in the absence of physical evidence to differentiate students, it appears that the subjectivity of student becomes the basis for defining women learning online. All students, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, are assumed to have the

characteristics of a universal student: an essentialized white, Canadian-born, able-bodied, heterosexual student who has the financial resources and skills to participate in online learning.

Subjectivity as a Student

Women learning online continue to be negotiating multiple subjectivities. Neither the online context nor the distance from the institution, instructor and other students negates these subjectivities even though they are hidden from view. The women in this study and in others described in the literature review confirm that women learning online come from diverse backgrounds. Their identities or sense of self develop from the multiple subjectivities and influences in their lives. They shift from student, to worker, mother, partner – yet they never completely separate from any of these subjectivities that define them. However, the invisibility of what is offline and physical distance combine to bring the subjectivity of student to the centre. They all appear to strongly associate with the subjectivity of student within the online learning context, and this common experience seems to bring them together. Drawing on their comments from their demographic forms and the focus group participants' introductions, it is clear that these women define themselves related to the subjectivities they experience, as they illustrate with the ways they began their introductory messages:

I look forward to meeting you and learning about your online experiences.

I live in an isolated part of Northern British Columbia. I have obtained much of my education through various forms of distance education.

(Karen)

Hello, it looks like I'm the second post in this new blog. I'm writing this message from my home computer. I have taken many online courses and I currently work at home, on a project for distance education students.

(Tracy)

I am a full-time student completing a B.Ed. after-degree and a full time mom of 2 little ones. (Rebecca)

I have also taken a number of online courses to continue my education. Right now I work part-time at a local college and am starting a business to fill in the non-academic part of the year. (Barbara)

I've been working on my Master's degree (online) for the past four years. During that time, I've taken two leaves of absence to welcome my second and third daughters. (Jessica)

I am joining this conversation a little late but I am delighted to be among all of you hard-working and determined women. I am currently a Master [degree] student with a prior graduate degree. (Michelle)

All of the women in the focus group highlight their subjectivities as students within the first three sentences of their introductory messages; however, other subjectivities are also presented in these first sentences: Karen lives in an

isolated community, Tracy can afford to have a computer at home, Rebecca and Jessica have children, Michelle is working on her second graduate degree, and Barbara and Tracy are self-employed. Throughout the focus group and interviews it becomes clear these women as a group occupy some or all of the following subjectivities: students, mothers, wives, employees (both self-employed at home and working for others outside of the home), community members, volunteers, supervisors and colleagues at work, classmates, friends, children, and on and offline teachers. However, they also share a subjectivity as students. This shared identity as a student seems to erase other differences leaving what appears to a common experience of being a student.

While the interview participants approach the subjectivity of student differently, probably because they were not invited to introduce themselves, they still show clear examples of how being a student became their main activity/identity. The interaction between work and school and other activities was discussed earlier, and it highlighted how schoolwork becomes interwoven with other activities and responsibilities. The women spoke about their lives revolving around studying. It became the central focus of their activities:

Every minute I got, I did school work. So that was 2 years... (Debra)

My life has been so focused that I am tired. (Sharon)

When people suggest doing something tonight then I would feel like I have this responsibility of schoolwork and I would say I think I should get my work done instead. (Nicole)

I was just thinking about how different my courses were this summer and just how enjoyable it was to be able to fully focus on schoolwork (Amy)

Cynthia, who is both an online instructor and a student herself, finds parallels between herself and the students she teaches:

But we create these ideas for ourselves: to be the best student, to be, to get the A, to get the scholarship, to get, and we create a lot of stuff. We put a lot of burdens on ourselves that we don't really need to, and that helps my students because I look at them and I'm telling them the same thing.

(Cynthia)

The women I interviewed also spoke about being students or part of a community of students within their cohort, thereby affirming their subjectivities as students:

Most people started taking classes, we all started at the same time, so we started to know each other over the, you know, year and a half. (Amy)

That was great because it brought us together once a week... our cohort got to meet. (Sharon)

There were students like myself... (Amy)

Being the mature student when I made a commitment, I'm there. (Debra)

Poststructural feminist understandings of multiple subjectivities fail to account for situations like the one highlighted above: the women in this study, all chose to self-identify as students. While they shared details about how their learning environments and experiences were different, the subjectivity of student, or perhaps more accurately student with multiple competing responsibilities, seemed to be understood as a shared experience. Their focus on that subjectivity may represent their understandings of this research, but it also affirms that being a student is a shared subjectivity between all participants. However, even with that shared subjectivity, their experiences were certainly not the same, which I discuss in more detail in my findings. While their narratives continue to illustrate the unique and individual subjectivities of the participants, they themselves see being a student as their primary subjectivity and they themselves tend to erase other subjectivities within their online learning environments.

Despite the diversity of any student population, in online learning contexts subjectivities can remain invisible to students, instructors, and institutions. The subjectivity of “student” can subsume all other subjectivities in the online classroom, where students are expected to set aside other responsibilities to focus on their academic learning. Not only does the subjectivity of student come to the front, but, in many cases their other responsibilities, as well as other aspects of their identity, remain invisible. By eliminating face-to-face interaction, or at least limiting it, learners’ lives outside of the classroom remain invisible. However, even when they are invisible, those other subjectivities continue to shape

women's experiences as students. Individual subjectivities are still present, but they become redefined as characteristics of the student rather than the individual. For example, a mother who balances family and school, and does well academically is praised as a hardworking student, while a mother who finds that family demands prevent her from spending as much time as she wants on schoolwork is seen as disorganized or not committed to her schoolwork.

For students, this shared subjectivity seems to create a feeling of connection. Their shared online experiences provide a starting point for developing relationships, in some cases, or sufficient connection to work together, in others. The orientation "boot camps" emphasize the need for a sense of shared experience to unite a diverse group of students. However, the shared subjectivity of student can also be used to ignore differences.

The distance and invisibility that come with the online environment truncate subjectivities even more than do face-to-face learning environments. The result is that the essentialized universal student becomes the most obvious and visible subjectivity in the educational context. Although multiple subjectivities is helpful in understanding these women and their diverse experiences, particularly as they navigate their multiple responsibilities on and offline, the theory of multiple subjectivities is most helpful in recognizing that their subjectivities are simplified and subjectivities other than student are erased in the online environment. By using poststructural feminist concepts of multiple subjectivities and positionalities, it is possible to problematize the lack of subjectivities that are presented in online learning environments as students become part of a

homogenous group where being a student subsumes other subjectivities. In the online learning environment, difference seems to be erased by the lack of physical interaction and the invisibility of differences. The erasure of difference parallels assumptions that women's responsibilities at home, in the family, and in the community are private concerns that should remain outside of their learning environments. Erasing difference also makes the online learning environment appear to be a less political context since difference appears to have already been eliminated.

In response to the subjectivity as a universal student, post-secondary institutions design and develop online programs. These programs are developed with certain expectations of who learners are and what their needs will be. They meet the needs of a particular vision of this universal student: one who cannot attend traditional classroom offerings and, therefore, relies on online courses to provide a more flexible alternative. The many different reasons that may prevent a student from attending a face-to-face course are presented in promotional materials (i.e. successful businessman who travels for work, stay-at-home mom, young student who needs to work to pay for school, resident of an isolated community without a college or university close by, etc); however, these reasons are not necessarily addressed in the actual delivery of the programs.

By focusing on the subjectivity of "student", institutions are able to create a picture of a universal online student (notice that even gender is removed in this standard). This approach makes it easier for educational institutions to develop programs to meet the needs of these students through "flexible" delivery. The

discourse of flexibility is used to as a way to address “the needs of diverse learners,” but actually, it ignores differences by shifting responsibility for addressing individual needs and all aspects of life outside the online classroom to the learner. Learners are expected to address private concerns that may interfere with their subjectivity as student. In essence, institutions are able to ignore diversity by claiming that by being flexible they are addressing the needs of all learners.

In the face of institutions seeing students as a generally homogenous group, educators need to be aware of how they approach difference in the online learning context. They must acknowledge it to themselves and be attentive to the assumptions they make about who their learners are and what their learners’ particular needs are. In some ways, they must work within the invisibility while assuming their learners are diverse and teaching in ways that respect that diversity, even if they cannot see it. Learners should have the choice of whether or not they disclose information about themselves, but even if learners choose not to self-identify as different, the online classroom should be inclusive.

Lack of Foundation for Action

One critique of the poststructural feminist concept of multiple subjectivities is that it makes it difficult for women to find a common foundation for action. By focusing on what makes them different rather than the same, women may feel separated rather than connected to each other (Collins, 2000; Flannery & Hayes, 2000; Hayes, 2000b). In the online learning environment, this

issue seems to be magnified by the distance between students. As I discussed above, the identity of “student” becomes the basis for the shared identity, at the expense of diversity of experience, backgrounds or other subjectivities. The diversity of experience coupled with the separation created through “distance” learning makes it even more difficult to find a foundation for bringing about change to address the needs of online learners whether those needs might be the unquestioned authority of a professor, or getting funding for programs, or unreasonable expectations of students, or requests for new classes, all of which are changes the women in this study sought. Change is also needed to meet the needs of women learning online through recognizing what goes on outside of the online learning environment that influences online experiences.

There are exceptions to this discussion of separate learners and invisibility. Some learners attended intense orientation programs where they formed deep connections with their classmates. In some cases these connections moved beyond academics to become friendships, while in others they remained strictly academic. Karen described forming friendships and professional relationships with classmates she had not met in person. However, there were only two situations where a group of students acted together to bring about change. One, which included Linda and her classmates in the autobiography writing class, involved a context in which students who felt particularly connected because they were sharing intimate details of their lives submitted a request for a follow up class. Another, which included Sharon who was part of the first cohort

in her program, involved students' comments provoking some changes for subsequent groups.

In order for the needs of women learning online to be recognized and addressed by institutions, women must feel comfortable identifying their concerns and must feel supported by others with similar issues or equally in need of institutional support. When learners are focused primarily on their subjectivities as students, they do not necessarily bring up concerns from other areas of their lives. Their only connection is through their academic interactions so they focus on academic issues.

For example, when I was the department's graduate student representative during my M.Ed., I prepared reports for each meeting to gather input from other students on the issues being discussed by the committee. Most of the students in the program were distance students who completed courses online, or part-time students who were only on campus for their weekly class meetings. My reports were posted on the department's listserv, but I rarely got any feedback. On occasion, another full-time, on campus student mentioned something from my notes, but the *only* time I got input from off-campus students was when the department wanted to change admission requirements. There was no interest in creating a community of learners, or to bring about change in the program, or to make connections between students. The distance between students created separation and made bringing people together even more difficult.

Concluding Comments: Where Does Theory Need to Go?

Multiple subjectivities and positionality are key concepts in poststructural feminist research and theorizing. They provide helpful understandings of the diverse experiences of women learning online, particularly in ensuring that diversity of experience is acknowledged, and in describing the changing power of women as they move through their off- and online experiences. However, these concepts do not ensure that the experiences of women learning online are not essentialized because the subjectivity of student overrides their individual differences. Based on my research about the experiences of women learning online, poststructural feminist theorizing about multiple subjectivities and positionalities needs to examine the following issues:

- How do invisibility and distance relate to subjectivity and positionality?
- How can learners find common ground to work for change?
- What happens to subjectivities when one subjectivity subsumes others?
- How are subjectivities represented, assumed and understood in online learning contexts in the absence of physical interaction?
- How are positionalities negotiated in online learning contexts in the absence of physical interaction?

Through my research I recognize the usefulness of poststructural feminist theorizing about multiple subjectivities and positionalities. It provides a way of understanding the diversity of women's experiences as they negotiate tensions

while learning online; however, my research also highlights gaps in such theorizing as the need to examine how distance and invisibility impact subjectivities and positionalities. By using these concepts, I can problematize how the subjectivity of the student subsumes other subjectivities, and allows institutions to respond in ways that put responsibility for difference back on the individual students.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSIONS

In this concluding chapter, I will review and summarize the material from the preceding chapters. I will also reflect on what I have learned from the process of researching and writing about the tensions women experience while learning online, and what questions remain unanswered. I will then envision the implications of this research on the field of online learning and identify areas for further research.

Both the literature about women learning online and the experiences of the women in this research study affirm that there are “messy spaces where complexities, contradictions and competing ideas, actions, expectations, values and emotions interact to produce opposition and opportunities” (Kelland, 2008). In other words, there are tensions in their experiences.

Reflecting Back

(Re)examining my Theoretical Framework

The poststructural feminist approach I used for this research allowed me to both examine the diversity of women’s experiences as online learners and to consider how structural elements of their lives contributed to the tensions they experienced in their learning. This theoretical framework was an effective tool for examining the discourses that shaped the women’s expectations of online learning and of themselves in the other subjectivities in their lives. By examining the discourses and structures within which the women were learning, I offer insight into where learners are able to mediate tensions and where they are without

options. In turn, this insight and my belief that it is possible to create just and inclusive learning environments can be used to suggest practical changes, policy directions, and further research to bring about change. Some examples are provided later in this chapter.

The concepts of multiple subjectivities and positionality proved to be particularly helpful concepts in examining the diverse experiences of the women in this study. However, through my theoretical analysis, I realized that there are gaps in this framework where there is a need for further examination of how distance and invisibility impact subjectivities and positionalities. Likewise, it seems that the diversity among learners can be erased through their shared subjectivities as students.

(Re)examining my Methodology

Combining photo-elicitation interviewing and an online focus group proved to be an interesting approach to research. As expected, I gathered a significant amount of data in different forms. The interviews were an opportunity to discuss with individual women their experiences as online learners. We talked about issues of interest to each woman, rather than seeking common ground. The focus group offered women an opportunity to discuss shared concerns. It was more about finding common experiences, while discussing how these experiences were manifested for each individual. To my surprise, there were different topics covered in each method of data collection, yet there were ways to connect the two methods. One way of creating connections was through the narrative vignettes that tell the stories of the individual women in both parts of the research. The

narrative vignettes illustrate elements of the women's experiences, which were not discussed in my research. The vignettes give voice to the unique experiences of each woman and provide more insight into her experiences.

(Re)examining the Literature

Reviewing the literature about women learning online highlighted the tensions inherent in studying this field. Researchers offer vastly varying perspectives on all areas of online learning. In some cases, the variation reflects the diversity of learners, educational institutions and programs, and theoretical and methodological approaches. In other cases, it reflects different pedagogical and philosophical understandings about technology and education. As Van Dusen (2000) succinctly states, perspectives about the effectiveness of the use of Internet communication technologies in education “[run] the gamut of views from utopian to apocalyptic” (p. iii).

The literature specific to women's experiences of learning online also identifies numerous tensions in these women's experiences. It illustrates how women have mediated the tensions they experience by making decisions about how to engage in online learning. They decide how much to offer of themselves, how to interact, and how to make time and space to fit online learning into their lives.

(Re)examining the Tensions Women Experience

Women in this study describe some of the complexities of their experiences. They recognize the different demands on their resources, and they make decisions about how to respond to those demands. They see how they

contribute to the tensions by setting high standards for themselves, yet they feel guilty when they think they are not doing the best they can. These opposing pulls represent tensions in their lives.

These women, and their classmates, are a diverse group of learners coming from different contexts and requiring different supports. They represent learners of different ages, geographical locations, and educational goals. These women also share characteristics that help them to be successful learners and capable of accessing resources necessary to participate in online learning. In this way, they are not a representative group of all Canadians or even all potential learners in Canada.

These women's experiences are shaped by discourses that claim lifelong learning is important and valuable for women who are working or seeking employment, that online learning provides accessible and flexible learning options for women, that women can do and should do everything, that women are less comfortable with technology, and that professors and institutions are powerful authorities in learning contexts.

From these women's experiences, I was able to identify three themes. First, the women describing how the boundaries between their home and school space and activities were blurred. In many cases, they experienced blurring of the boundaries between their work activities, too. Secondly, the flexibility of online learning came with a cost. While the women appreciated the option of doing their schoolwork anytime and anywhere, that option brought with it the need to make decisions about sacrificing personal time and academic expectations. Third, these

women used three strategies to mediate tensions in their lives: multitasking, procrastinating and persevering. These strategies helped the women to complete their course work amidst their other responsibilities.

(Re)examining Flexibility

Online learning is promoted by institutions, businesses and government as being “access[ible] from anywhere, at any time, by anyone” (Kelland, 2005a, p. 131). It is also described as a flexible solution to meet learners’ diverse needs (for example, see Athabasca University, 2010b). And, through their expectations and experiences, the women in this study affirm that the flexibility of online learning is one of their primary reasons for choosing it and for preferring it to traditional, on-campus learning. However, one of the most important messages that I got from this research is that while terms like “flexible” and “accessible” suggest that online learning will be easy to incorporate into a busy life; that suggestion is not accurate. The flexibility of online learning makes it possible to fit it into women’s lives, but it is not an easy fit. The following scenario I wrote in my research journal while reflecting on the experience of the women in this study. It describes what women may experience while they learn online:

For women learning online, sitting down at the computer to do school work is not just about sitting in front of the computer. It involves a series of negotiations around scheduling computer access within the family, and sometimes around availability of Internet access; around finding a location that is conducive to study goals, which may change depending on the type of work being completed; around negotiating

childcare or waiting until children are sleeping; around prioritizing school work in a 'to do' list that involves domestic responsibilities, paid employment (sometimes from multiple sources), volunteer and community involvement, family and social commitments, self-care, and maintaining spousal relationships.

Once the women are ready to start school work, the negotiation continues as they use their time as efficiently as possibly by multitasking on and offline; measuring the value of their time and determining what effort they can commit to an assignment or discussion; deciding how much to invest in building community with classmates; and trying to balance their personal expectations about what is necessary to be a successful student and a good wife or partner, mother, employee, etc. They struggle with the feeling they need to be a "superhero."

The inner struggle continues as interruptions and distractions present themselves in the guise of housework, social engagements and the inevitable crises that arise in the lives of people around them. The solutions to these challenges, if any exist, can vary from day to day or even minute to minute. What worked yesterday may not be feasible today.

While women may be very interested in schoolwork and passionate about learning, they also feel guilty about letting down family, classmates, friends and themselves.

All of this is, of course, external to the actual academic content they are approaching. In addition to challenges of institutional policies

that may interfere with the ability to focus on schoolwork, they are negotiating relationships with a professor (or professors if she is enrolled in multiple classes) and, quite possibly, with classmates who may or may not share their work ethic.

These challenge seems worth it for the added convenience of learning online, the opportunity for learning and personal development, the friendships developed with cohort members, the opportunity to pursue learning goals without inconvenience to family, the feeling of connections with classmates, and the feeling of accomplishment upon finishing courses and/or programs.

Personal Reflections

Early in this process, someone asked me to consider what it would be like to do research about online learning if it was considered the norm. This question made me consider how my research would be different if online learning was judged in relation to our understandings and expectations of “traditional” or “on-campus” or “face-to-face” learning. I thought about that throughout this research. I reminded myself that online learning, like the experiences of women, could be considered in and of itself. It is not necessary to continually compare it to the reference of on-campus learning. I tried to remember this perspective during the interviews and focus group, and while writing up this research. It is a challenge to set aside the dichotomy of face-to-face/online learning because of my many years of experience in face-to-face learning contexts, which have shaped my expectations about how learning should look and feel.

But that question has always been in the back of my mind. What if learning online was the norm? What if students expected to connect with each other using the Internet or other communication technologies? What if asynchronous chat rooms and synchronous video chats were familiar ways of communicating? What could students learn from each other and themselves? What if work and school were equally important and complementary activities?

Rather than accepting the image of a student to be “the full-time undergraduate who is a recent high school graduate” other possibilities could be considered... What if all students were also balancing other responsibilities? What if those other responsibilities were always made visible? How would institutions support learners with their diverse needs? Who would be responsible for providing supports to learners? What policies would be implemented to structure and guide online institutions? What if multitasking was an acceptable way to deal with numerous responsibilities, and courses were designed to be completed in short bursts of activity? Would lifelong learning become something everyone could do, if they had access to the appropriate technology? Would education be accessible to all potential learners?

Through this research, I gained a new appreciation for online learning and its potential applications. My perspective about online learning has been shaded by my own experiences. Learning online felt isolating and it was lacking in what I wanted from my graduate school experiences. In contrast, the women in this research saw it as a way to overcome challenges in their own lives and to access learning opportunities. While I am not convinced that leaving full time

employment to study online or preventing my husband from eating an apple because it is too noisy or having to record myself on video to share with my classmates would work for me, I can see how these women have all made space in their lives for online learning – and I can see that the space required to enroll in a face-to-face course according on an institution’s schedule may not have been available for other forms of learning. They each had reasons about why to enroll online, and made different decisions about how to approach their learning, and about how to fit it and their other responsibilities together, but they all managed to do it. Some felt guilt and others would have made different choices in retrospect, but they all learned from their experiences, as have I.

When I have the opportunity to teach online or work with online educators, I will remember these women’s stories and use them to remind other educators and policy makers that the lives of online students are complex. Students are trying to balance competing demands offline and to navigate unfamiliar online environments. Based on the stories in this study, women are motivated and persistent; they will work hard to achieve their goals, but that persistent nature should not be mistaken as a sign that online learning fits easily into their lives. The structures and discourses that shape their experiences still need to be examined, and alternatives need to be considered if online learning is to be as flexible and accessible as advertisements would have potential learners believe.

Questions Arising

This research raises many questions for further consideration. While some are questions that could prompt further research, most are questions for educators, students, and policy makers to consider. The questions start to deconstruct online learning and its place in women's lives. The questions challenge our understandings of flexibility and accessibility, and the space and place of learning.

- If learning is so important to both learners and their employers, why is moving it from the workplace to the home considered to be a solution? Why are employers, who will benefit from the training and credentials of their employees, not providing more time and space for learning?
- While online is not designed to be a “second class” learning experience (Perraton, 2007), is it becoming one because of the way it is integrated into learners' lives? Does studying late at night and early in the morning affect the quality of learners' education?
- If learning is really valued, why are time and space not set aside for it? Why should learning be the thing that is added on to everything else? Why does it have to be considered normal to multitask in order to fit learning into a busy schedule?
- Does combining fulltime study with fulltime work create “synergy” or “collisions” (Kazmer & Haythornthwaite, 2001, p. 523)? Are there ways to make the two compatible, or will there continue to be opposing pulls between work and school? How is this relationship

complicated for women when there is also a pull from family and/or home responsibilities?

- What is the relationship between school, work and home? How does each shift in relative importance in different contexts? How does technology create and mediate tensions? Is learning considered to be a lower priority, an extra piece in the puzzle?

Envisioning

Implications

In order to improve retention and graduation rates for online learning, researchers usually consider the fit between the institution and the individual learner (Dupin-Bryant, 2004) or the characteristics and resources of the individual learner (Castles, 2004). Both of these approaches put responsibility for completion on the individual and his or her characteristics rather than on structural factors. Faculty members and institutional staff use online and face-to-face orientations to prepare students for online learning by introducing them to the technology they will use, and the program structure and the institutional policies that will shape their learning experiences (Haythornthwaite, et al., 2000; Hodgkinson, 2002; Scagnoli, 2001). Orientations also attempt to create a sense of community among learners and to prepare them for the challenges of learning online. However, what this research suggests is that the challenges of online learning are too complex to resolve fully, even by applying good time management skills, by creating a support network or by identifying which

activities can be set aside while learning online (Hartley, Gill, Walters, Bryant, & Carter, 2001; Kazmer & Haythornthwaite, 2001; Roper, 2007). A solution that may work for a learner on a particular day may not be appropriate on another day or at another time. Educators and policy makers alike need to consider how online learning will actually fit into learners' lives. The images of online learning in promotional materials and the rhetoric of flexible learning does not always reflect the reality of online learning. My husband laughed at the description of the advertisement with a mother and her child at the computer together. He wondered whether the person who developed the ad had ever tried to sit at a computer with a three-year-old on his or her lap.

There seems to be a trend towards more collaborative learning online (Garrison & Archer, 2007, p. 78), which is encouraged by the literature of best practices with a focus on constructivist learning in online settings (Kelland, 2006a) – another interesting trend which is not necessarily seen in face-to-face lecture settings. The focus on collaboration often brings with it a need for synchronous communication whether it is text-based discussion in an online chat room or interactive audio and video conferencing. Requiring more synchronous interaction may have pedagogical benefits, but it comes at the expense of flexibility. As Karen said, “At the current time, online learning is flexible. If the trend towards more online synchronous interaction continues, however, flexibility of time will be reduced.”

Educators need to examine what works for learners and what does not. In the case of online learning, they cannot assume that once students enroll or join

the virtual classroom that they have all the supports in place for their learning. Within the hybrid space of the online classroom, the realities of the offline world can still intrude (Kazmer, 2005a), and educators, program developers and policy makers need to be aware of what is happening beyond the CMS. They need to be proactive in developing policies that support learners. In many cases, this will require actually looking at learners' situations both online and offline to identify and understand what supports they need. Those needs will range from technical computer support, to intellectual inspiration, to addressing practical needs, and to overcoming barriers to participation. Learners' needs will not always be easy to recognize or identify, especially if learners are trying to present themselves as good students in their online classes. While somewhat humorous, but still accurate, in the case of the women in this study, the women's needs could be as diverse as childcare support for Jessica, reminders to eat regular meals for Nicole, materials that can be viewed using dial-up Internet for Karen, a way to feel her professor's passion for Michelle, access to services for students with disabilities for Barbara, and assistance with student loan documents and institutional policies for Cynthia. While it may not be part of the institutional mandate to address all of these needs, Burge (1998) offers some concrete suggestions that could be helpful if updated for online learning:

Acknowledge the sheer diversity among women in terms of life experience.... Expect that at-home study conditions may include a struggle to reach the family computer or study at times when other family members are watching TV... Don't [schedule synchronous discussions] at

times of day when child-care may be a problem... Suggest that a less-than-perfectly run house is OK, indeed expected. (pp. 38-39)

Without proper supports, women may be able to complete their degrees, but at what cost? When faced with institutions that are not supportive of their needs, many, like Cynthia, leave the program, or they may persist by adopting “inappropriate academic street-smarts (e.g. ‘anything to get my degree’)” (Burge, 1998, p. 32).

There may be ways to learn from the research about working at home in order to improve learners’ situations. Kaufman-Scarborough (2006) points out that using technology to facilitate working at home actually increases stress and interruptions. Mirchandani (1999) describes how teleworkers use rituals to create separation between home and work, and to establish and maintain the value of their work space and time. Online learners may be able to learn from the experiences of teleworkers how to use technology to efficiently balance multiple responsibilities and how to ensure that their schoolwork is recognized and valued rather than being invisible and misunderstood.

Future Research

This research raises many questions for further consideration. There are still many areas of women’s experiences learning online to be considered. It appears that the pedagogical aspects of online learning are being thoroughly examined, but the practical considerations of the learner’s situation are what need more attention. There is especially a need to understand the learners’ offline

activities and other responsibilities, which can support or interfere with their online learning. Here are some suggestions for further research:

- Research should examine more of what happens within the “black box” (Servage, 2007, p. 563) of the home because it has a significant impact on the quality of learning that occurs. The home environment is not neutral or without important implications for learners.
- Multitasking and time use in work contexts is being researched and examined as work time and location become more flexible with technology; however, the same type of research about learning contexts is not occurring (Servage, 2007). Online learners have access to the same technologies as workers. Learners face the same blurring of boundaries between school and home life, but they often add a further layer of complexity because they are also workers. With, at least, three different competing sets of responsibilities, questions about learners use of time and technology, and about how the flexibility of technology provides both opportunities and constraints, are important questions to consider.
- There seems to be an intensity inherent in some online learning settings. Is this intensity an intentional design element, a result of the community dynamics, or characteristics of the self-motivated learners who pursue online learning? Further research could examine how this intensity influences learners: Does it serve as a motivation, a form of surveillance or an obstacle to participation?

- More research is needed about women's experiences among learners who are not satisfied with their experiences or who are not successful in completing their classes. What can be learned from the tensions they experienced?
- What tensions do women experience teaching online? Some researchers have examined this from a pedagogical perspective (for example, see Burge, Laroque, & Boak, 2000), but again the offline responsibilities of the women studied are not made visible either to their students or their employers.
- There is space for further research about the discourses that shape the experiences of online learners. Who is promoting the discourse of online learning being more flexible and accessible? Who benefits from this discourse? How does it impact women learning online? In what ways does it cause tensions for women teaching and learning online? What alternate discourses could be created to mediate these tensions?

Concluding Perspectives

What is most obvious from this research is that these women can and did persist in learning in the form that was available to them. They choose to use online learning as a tool to meet their learning goals, as either a preferred method of learning or as the best option for their context. The challenges of technology seem to be a minimal, if any, deterrent. Likewise, they are willing to accept the tradeoffs that accompany the flexibility of online learning. With their goals in

mind, they are prepared to put aside social activities and leisure time. They are willing to work hard to complete their studies, and they are generally successful and satisfied with their experiences.

LEARNING ONLINE WHILE LIVING ON CAMPUS: MY NARRATIVE

Program: M.Ed. degree

Personal situation: Age 24, not married, no children when I was learning online

Employment: Full-time student

Previous/Concurrent Online Experience: Completed pre-requisite courses through distance and online delivery. Worked as an online writing tutor while completing M.Ed. program

The following is an expanded narrative from my own experiences as an online learner (Blakey, 2003).

My parents were important contributors to my educational experiences. Through them, my preparation for studying online started long before I registered in my classes. I think my first experience using a computer occurred when I was five or six years old. I played some games on it, and I learned some very basic programming skills. I got used to having a computer around the house and it became a useful tool for composition, entertainment and organization. Later, the Internet became a tool for research and communication.

My introduction to distance learning was also influenced by my parents. My mother was a teacher and helped me develop many of my academic skills. It was also through her that I learned to recognize learning opportunities outside of the formal classroom. She taught me the importance of education and of being open to new experiences. My father worked in the field of distance education. He

provided technical support for courses being offered by teleconference and videoconference. Because of these influences, new ways of learning, such as distance learning, were not foreign to me.

My first experience with distance learning was in my third year of my BA in history. The majority of the students were at the host site, only two were at the remote site. The instructor was in the host site where I was, so from my perspective, it was much like a normal course but with supplemental technology - smart board, data projector, Internet connection. Sure, it took a little while to get used to seeing myself on the video screen and to remember to push the microphone button when I wanted to talk, but other than that, I didn't have an opinion about the distance learning experience. However, I could see that the distant students found it challenging.

Another experience with distance learning came as I prepared for my master's degree program. I had to complete three prerequisites: a statistics course and two education courses. I started with a correspondence course in statistics. When I enrolled for my prerequisite courses, I wanted efficiency. I needed to finish the courses to start my degree in the fall. I wanted to acquire as much information as efficiently as possible and as easily as I could so I would have the academic requirements for admission to a master's degree. I didn't want to waste time with extras that would slow down the process. I know I can be organized and efficient to get things done. Working alone, I thought I would be able to overcome the inherent waste of time I had previously experienced in traditional classes. My approach was focused on the academics and the mind. I wanted information, not

connections. So, from my current perspective, it is very interesting to see how I wanted the master's degree program to provide all the qualities that I hoped to avoid in my prerequisite courses.

My first online courses were the education courses that were pre-requisites for my Master's degree program. I took them from an institution located in another province, and another time zone. I was excited about my first online course. I had read about online courses. I had heard about distance learning from my father who coordinated teleconferencing and videoconferencing, and I had registered students in distance learning courses. I had a lot of background knowledge, but no experience. I was looking forward to this wonderful opportunity to learn online, to connect to students from across the country and to try out this new technology. This pattern repeated itself as I took other online courses. At the beginning of every course I felt anticipation about learning the content, meeting a new professor, and working with new students. But, every time the novelty wore off as technical problems, working in isolation and content-oriented instruction compounded my feelings of isolation.

Before finishing my prerequisite courses, I certainly demonstrated that I could work in less than ideal conditions: at the kitchen table, in the cafeteria during my lunch break, late at night after a full day of work, at 8:30 am on Sundays with my breakfast in hand, when my arms ached from typing so much at work and at home, with library books from two different libraries in two different cities (getting to one involved a two-hour drive), connected to the Internet with a dial up modem, using an e-mail account with only 60 minutes of access each

day... and the list goes on.... I could be the poster child for distance learning. But would anyone really want to promote my experiences?

My graduate-level experience with online learning was sudden and unexpected. No one had informed me that the program in which I was enrolled was available entirely online. I felt betrayed by the people who had answered my questions by e-mail for the preceding twelve or more months as I made my plans to move across the country to pursue full-time studies as part of a community of graduate students. The promotional material about the program also omitted any information about course delivery, though that has now changed, in part, because of a formal request from the graduate students' union of the university, in response to my efforts to ensure other students don't find themselves in the same situation.

After moving across the country, I met with an advisor who identified the courses required in the first term of the master's degree. Two of these three courses were web-based. Not only did I have concerns about the unexpectedness of this announcement, but it increased my anxiety about taking graduate level courses. I had been a good student at the undergraduate level but I had no idea what to expect at the graduate level. Discovering I was going to have to tackle it by myself was not what I expected. It appeared that I was not going to be able to interact with other graduate students to share ideas and work together. What happened to my image of being part of a learning community? How would online learning affect the quality of my education?

As the first day of my M.Ed. classes approached and I prepared for my first

face-to-face class, I recognized one advantage of online courses - no one would see me and realize how insecure I was. They wouldn't know how young I was and that I had never done this before. I could hide that online. No one would have to know I was nervous. I could write well enough to disguise my anxiety, and hopefully, my inexperience. It wasn't until the end of that first term that I actually felt I could be a successful graduate student. The turning point was submitting my assignment for my first on-campus course. I don't know if it was the length and breadth of the assignment that convinced me that I was capable, or if it was the assignment itself, which developed in parallel to relationships with the course professor, my classmates, and research participants. This type of involved, and challenging work, was not a component of my online courses, which required me only to write papers. Maybe the research component of the assignment, which forced me into new situations, or the personal investment in the project, was what made it so significant. Whatever it was, I know it was missing in my online courses.

I didn't always find the classroom "representative of the larger social community" (Glassman, 2001, p. 9). The first day I was able to log in to my online courses in my Master's degree was September 11, 2001. It was while I was exploring the course web site that I heard about the terrorist attacks in the United States. Soon, the city and the university community around me were mobilizing to house hundreds of delayed passengers. The university campus was an integral part of the process. It was obvious everywhere I went that the events in the United States were impacting my educational environment. But in my online courses, the

academic world went on without a pause. There was no mention of the displaced passengers staying on campus. There was no discussion of how international events were changing the world. The only references to the terrorist attacks occurred at a teleconference session where one student explained she was calling in from Toronto as she waited for the airports to reopen, and another student who explained he was too busy helping out on campus to log in to the web site during the first week of class. The contrast between the real world, and the online classroom certainly didn't show that we were situated in the same social context.

As a full-time student, enrolled mostly in distance learning classes, yet living on campus, I was certainly not part of the majority. I sometimes felt my physical presence was not only not acknowledged but also not wanted - that I was supposed to be a distance student so I should stay at a distance. I had the right to access all the services on campus, but at the same time, I was distanced by the delivery method that assumed I was not able to see the education building from my window. I was definitely not the intended audience for my program and I was expected to adapt to the way that was most convenient for the majority (or so I was told). When I asked too many questions about why courses were offered online I was told that most students wanted that. My presence wasn't enough to make any changes to the system.

I did not register in graduate level distance learning courses because of their accessibility from anywhere at any time. But, once I was enrolled, I took advantage of the flexibility. I was able to make two trips home during the term because, as long as I had Internet access, I could work from anywhere. I

appreciated the opportunity to visit family and friends, even with the responsibilities of my course work constantly looming in the background. I did some work before my trips and I worked to catch up afterwards so I could enjoy my holidays. The flexibility allowed me to travel but it didn't reduce the amount of work or the fact that I was continually tied to my classes, even from across the country.

As I completed the course work for my M.Ed. degree, I was sure that I did not want to write a thesis. I was becoming increasingly disillusioned with the academic system, and the prospect of producing another academic paper to fit a set of arbitrary guidelines, unrelated to my personal experiences and interests, was not appealing. The twelve months I spent working, mostly online, to complete the course requirements of the degree did not meet my, possibly idealized, image of graduate work, which I expected would include discussion and application of course material outside of the classroom, exploration of new ideas and experiences, participation in a community of scholars, and a collegial environment. None of these had materialized. In fact, I felt invisible to many of my classmates and unconnected to them and to my professors. Essentially, I had been working independently and in isolation on my studies for most of my courses, and undertaking more individual study through a thesis did not meet my personal, professional and academic needs.

Since I enrolled in my first online class it has been nearly a decade. During that time, I have completed pre-requisites and a Master's degree, and I am now completing a doctoral degree. My own understanding of online learning has

changed as I have seen educators and students use technology in ways that create environments where learners feel connected to each other and excited about the subject matter.

I wonder if I was to enroll in an online course now, whether my experiences would be different. What shapes my experiences as a learner? How are my perceptions shaped by my own experiences and expectations as a learner? How much depends on the professor and the content? What role does the technology play in those experiences? Are the face-to-face orientations and summer institutes what make a program successful?

Clearly some of the women had experiences learning online that were different from mine. I think of Debra who made sure her classmate finished her program after her husband died, or Karen who started a business with a classmate she has never met, or Nicole who wants to check in with her classmates before she even has breakfast. Their experiences seem so different from mine; they feel connected to the content and the people in their courses in ways that I did not. They express an excitement about their learning that I was seeking.

So, I have to wonder, what was different about our experiences? Obviously technological developments and ongoing research about online learning have brought about changes over the last decade. In most cases, Internet connections are much faster, which allows instructors to use a wider range of tools for communicating and delivering content. For example, interactive audio presentations with Power Point slides can often be accessed and delivered from learners' home computers with very little extra hardware or software. The

opportunity to hear each other's voices and to communicate in real time, seems to bring learners together. However, as Karen pointed out, with increased synchronous communication comes less flexibility for learners.

A part of me wonders how important it is for women learning online to have competing demands in their lives. Does having other responsibilities in their lives give them other outlets for their energies and other sources of support? When I was learning online, I was living across the country from family in a community and a university that were new to me. My main focus was my education; I only had my coursework and a few hours of paid RA work to fill my time. Unlike these women, I did not have a full-time job, or a family, or community activities to give me a break from my schoolwork or to motivate me to be efficient in my studying. I did not get my social fix from work, like Nicole, and I did not have someone to go to the gym with every morning, like Debra. Even the women in this study who were full-time students had other things going on their lives that may have, as a whole, met their learning needs. In contrast, I had far fewer other aspects of my life compensating for what I felt was missing online.

As I reflect on my research, and what I have learned from my own reading, my courses and my interactions with other people interested in online learning, including the women in this research, I think about how I would apply what I have learned. What do I envision? How would I approach creating an online course or teaching online? I have two areas I think I would focus on:

acknowledging that online learning cannot be separated from offline activities and incorporating opportunities for synchronous communication.

First, I think that institutions and educators both need to be aware of what happens offline and to support learners in making their offline lives visible. I could do this by giving learners opportunities to share their offline experiences, for example relevant work or volunteer experience, in class discussions. Women in this study and others have stated this is valuable in their learning (T. L. Thompson et al., 2007). But, I do not think the only parts of their offline lives that are important are those that relate to the course content. Learners bring a diverse set of experiences and backgrounds to their individual learning experiences. They should be given space and tools to express who they are as learners and as individuals. One way I think this can be done is to allow learners to post a picture or image to represent themselves. This picture could be similar to the avatars used in blogging programs like WordPress or the profile pictures used in Facebook. Some may prefer another way of identifying themselves like a picture of a favourite activity or interest, or a symbol or artistic representation. Learners should be able to easily change these images as their interests, moods and perspectives change. Much like a Facebook user or WordPress blogger can easily replace the image representing them, learners should also have that option. To again draw on the social networking features of Facebook, students could also provide short status updates to reflect how they are feeling (i.e. “Jenna is feeling frustrated by thesis writing,” or “Jenna is celebrating finishing her first draft,” or “Jenna doesn’t know if teething babies or deadlines are causing her more stress

today”). This type of communication is becoming familiar in other social networking contexts, and the short, personal messages could be a way to acknowledge both emotional states and offline activities.

Second, I would include opportunities for synchronous communication. Having participated in synchronous online conversations or “chats” before, I would not necessarily recommend that format. Instead, I would envision audio or video chat. As some of the women in this study described, a program like Elluminate could be used for presentations with discussions. While some learners find this type of connection challenging because of connection or time zone issues, I still think it is a valuable tool for bringing learners together. Because online learners are busy and often have other responsibilities, these sessions would have to be scheduled in advance and learners would have to be aware of the times and dates with as much notice as possible. They would also need to be advised of the need to participate when they researched the program prior to enrollment. I would ensure the rationale for including these sessions was clear. The pedagogical reasons for including them, as well as the benefits to learners, would have to be provided. It would not benefit learners to feel they were participating because the institution wanted to try out their new technology or because the professor was not able to clearly communicate in other contexts. The frequency and duration of these sessions would depend on the course structure and content, the program structure (cohort based or not), and whether the learners had participated in face-to-face orientations or institutes. In addition to organized, synchronous class meetings, learners should be offered opportunities to have their

own synchronous meetings using the same technology tools or encouraged to use other tools ranging from three-way calling (low tech) to online collaborative tools so they can work together synchronously and asynchronously.

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Appendix A

Exploring how Women Learning Online Mediate Tensions in Their Learning Environments

My name is Jenna Kelland. I am a PhD student in the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Alberta. The study I am describing here is for my doctoral thesis.

My area of study is adult education and learning, specifically women's experiences with learning online. I am particularly interested in those situations where your values, priorities, goals, relationships, responsibilities and the realities of your everyday life, as they relate to your learning online, pull you in different directions. If you are interested in participating and you have taken at least two postsecondary-level courses online, I would like to hear about what pulls you in different directions, how this influences your learning online, and how you work with and through those situations to reach your learning goals.

Photo Interviews

If you agree to participate in this study, I would like you to take part in a photo interview. To prepare for this type of interview, I will ask you to take photographs representing your experiences as an online learner. You may use your own digital camera or I can provide you with a disposable camera. After you have taken as many photographs as you would like, we will meet to discuss the photos at a time and place that are convenient for you. This interview will take about 60 to 90 minutes. I will record the interview and transcribe it. Later, I may ask you to participate in a second interview.

Before the first interview, I will provide you with more guidelines to help you take your photographs and I will ask you to fill out a one-page form, which will tell me a little bit more about you and your educational experiences. We will discuss the information on this form in more detail during the interview. At the interview, I will ask you to consider giving me permission to use your photographs in my thesis and/or in journal articles or conference presentations. I may ask if you know other women who might be interested in participating in this research.

Online Focus Group

I may also conduct an online focus group but you are not required to participate in both the interviews and the focus group. The focus group will last 4 to 6 weeks and will be conducted as an online discussion on a secure website. Participants in the focus group will be asked to log on to the focus group site every 2 to 3 days to contribute to the online discussion. I will download and save the transcript of the online focus group. You will be required to select a screen name to identify yourself during the focus group to protect your confidentiality.

I do not anticipate that you will experience any harm or negative effects from your participation, but you may feel uncomfortable talking about your experiences if they caused you stress or anxiety. You may, however, benefit from the insight gained while you reflect on your online learning experiences, and, hopefully, you will also enjoy the process of photographing and sharing your experiences. This research could potentially lead to better understandings of the experiences of women learning online, which could subsequently be applied in policy development and in the practices of institutions and individual instructors.

If you are interested, please read the following guidelines for participating. If you choose to participate, please sign the consent form below.

Consent to participate in a doctoral research project entitled ***Exploring how Women Learning Online Mediate Tensions in Their Learning Environments***

I understand that:

- I have the right to refrain from answering any particular questions.
- I have the right to remove and/or destroy any photographs and negatives (if applicable) at any time during the research process.
- I have the right to withdraw from the research at any time without penalty.
- my interview will be recorded and transcribed to ensure accuracy. The researcher will keep the recordings of the interviews and transcripts confidential and in a safe location. After five years, she will destroy the tapes and transcripts.
- only the researcher and the transcriber, who is required to sign a confidentiality agreement, will have access to interview data. Only the researcher will have access to focus group data. Only the researcher will have access to photographs and negatives (if applicable).
- to ensure confidentiality, I will be identified by a pseudonym, and some of my photographs may be edited (i.e. obscured or cropped) to protect my confidentiality.
- the information I provide will be used in a doctoral thesis. The researcher may also use information from interview and focus group transcripts for conference papers, educational presentations/workshops, journal articles and web postings. The same ethical considerations and safeguards regarding confidentiality will apply whenever the researcher uses my information. I will be asked to sign a separate consent form to identify how my photographs can be used.
- I will be able to review research and photographic materials as part of a collaborative review process. I will be provided with drafts of analyses for correction, amendment, and editing. My interpretations, resistances, and challenges will be taken into account in the rewriting and editing processes.
- the researcher will give me a copy of her thesis. If I would like copies of any secondary publications, I can request them from the researcher.

Name of participant (*Please print*): _____

Signature of participant:		Date:	
Signature of researcher:		Date:	

Researcher:
 Jennifer Kelland, PhD Candidate
 Dept. of Educational Policy Studies
 University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB

jenna.kelland@ualberta.ca

Supervisor:
 Dr. André Grace, PhD
 Dept. of Educational Policy Studies
 University of Alberta Edmonton, AB
 780-492-0767
andre.grace@ualberta.ca

There are two copies of this consent form, one to be signed and returned to the researcher (Jennifer Kelland), and one for the participant to keep for her own records.

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by the Faculties of Education and Extension Research Ethics Board (EE REB) at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Chair of the EE REB at (780) 492-3751.

APPENDIX B

How to join the blog

1. You will receive an invitation message from me via WordPress. Click on the link “to accept this invitation.” I will send that invitation immediately after I send this message.
2. You will be taken to the Word Press web site. Choose a user name and password. You will have to provide an email address, too. At the bottom of the page, select “Just a username, please.”
3. You will be taken to a page where you can create a Word Press profile. Please put something in the name box, either your real name or your screen name. You don’t need to fill out anything else on this page to be part of the focus group.
4. You will receive an email message from Word Press with a link to activate your account. You must click on that link within 2 days or you will need to repeat steps 1 and 4.
5. You will receive a message from Word Press stating that you’ve been added as a contributor. That means everything is ready.
6. Once your account is activated, email me to let me know your user name.
7. Follow the instructions below to log on for the first time.
8. Please complete this process before February 1, so we can be sure everyone has access to the site before the focus group starts.
9. If you have any problems, please email me. I’ve tried to be thorough in these instructions, but I’m also learning as I go.

Logging on for the first time

1. Go to <http://womenlearningonline.wordpress.com> Log in using your user name and password.
2. You will see a welcome message. Click on the title (Welcome!). Read the message and reply with your own introduction.
3. On the right side of the screen, under the heading “Email Subscription” click the button that says “Sign me up!” You will then receive an email notice every time I post a new discussion topic for the blog. I anticipate doing this every 2 or 3 days, depending on the flow of the focus group.

I’ve tried to keep the blog layout simple, and I’ve kept the features on it to a minimum. If there’s something you’d like to see added or that you think would make participating easier, please let me know. This is my first time doing an online focus group like this, so I’m learning from this process too. Thanks!

APPENDIX C

Demographics Form

Please complete the following questionnaire. All responses will be kept confidential.

		<i>Please enter your responses in this column.</i>
1.	Name	
2.	Phone Number	
3.	E-Mail Address	
4.	Address	
5.	Date of Birth (year)	
6.	Ethnicity	
7.	Marital and family status	
8.	Job title, if employed. If not, how are you funding your studies?	
9.	Are you studying fulltime or parttime?	
10.	How long have you been taking online courses?	
11.	How many online courses have you taken?	
12.	In which field(s) of study have you taken online courses?	
13.	Through which institution(s) have you taken online courses?	
14.	What level of study best describes your online courses?	<input type="checkbox"/> High school <input type="checkbox"/> Certificate (1 year of postsecondary study) <input type="checkbox"/> Diploma (2 years of postsecondary study) <input type="checkbox"/> Bachelor degree <input type="checkbox"/> Postgraduate certificate or diploma (1 year of study after Bachelor degree) <input type="checkbox"/> Master's degree <input type="checkbox"/> Doctoral degree <input type="checkbox"/> Other:
15.	Briefly list the other things in your life that are/have influenced your experiences as an online learner (for example, career, family, volunteer work, travel, health issues, major life events, etc).	
16.	Describe, in a few words, how comfortable you are using a computer.	

APPENDIX D

Instructions for Participants for Photography Project

I would like you to think about the situations related to your learning where your values, priorities, goals, relationships, responsibilities, and the realities of your everyday life pull you in different directions. What images come to mind when you think about those situations?

Here are some things to keep in mind:

- There are no limits on what you can photograph as long as you are not putting yourself or others at risk to take the picture or by sharing the picture.
- If you take a picture of another person who can be identified, you will need to have that person complete a consent for photography form. I will provide you with copies of this form. If they have any other questions about the research, they can contact me. My contact information will be included on the form.
- Don't worry about your skills as a photographer. I will not evaluate the quality of your photos.
- If you are worried a photo might not turn out, take another shot of it.
- You can take photos of any of the following:
 - real places, objects, or situations
 - photos that represent ideas, feelings or relationships
 - naturally occurring situations
 - staged situations which are constructed for the purpose of this project
- Take as few or as many pictures as you would like.

After you have finished taking your photographs, please call (_____) or email me (jenna.kelland@ualberta.ca). We will then arrange for me to get prints of the photos and schedule an interview time to discuss them.

If there are photos you would rather not have used for this research, I will remove them and that data will not be included in the research study. Likewise, if there are photos you would not want to have used in any publications or presentations, I can ensure they are only used for research purposes and not included in any publications. At the interview I will ask you to sign a form that identifies how I can use your photographs.

Researcher:
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The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by the Faculties of Education and Extension Research Ethics Board (EE REB) at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Chair of the EE REB at (780) 492-3751.

APPENDIX E

Permission to Use Participant's Photographs

I understand that, Jennifer Kelland, a researcher from the University of Alberta is requesting to use these photographs for the purpose of research. If I would like to have copies of the photographs for my own collection, Jennifer will provide them on request.

I understand that: (choose either A, B or C):

A. The researcher, Jennifer Kelland, will use these photographs only as data for analysis. (They will not be made public in any way.)

OR

B. These photographs may be used in the researcher's dissertation, scholarly publications (including books), web postings and in presentations at academic conferences. Photographs will not reveal my identity (i.e. photos may be electronically edited or cropped to remove identifying details). In captions and in discussions about the images, only pseudonyms will be used.

OR

C. These images that identify me may be used in the researcher's dissertation, scholarly publications (including books), web postings and in presentations at academic conferences. In captions and in discussions about the images, only pseudonyms will be used.

Restrictions, if any: _____

My signature below indicates that I consent* to the above-described collection, use and disclosure of photographs and captions.

Name of Participant: _____
(please print)

Signature of participant:		Date:	
---------------------------	--	-------	--

*I understand that I may withdraw this consent at any time by contacting the researcher (Jennifer Kelland) or her supervisor (Dr. André Grace).

Jennifer Kelland, PhD Candidate
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Edmonton, AB T6G 2G5

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APPENDIX F

Consent for Photography

Name of person to be photographed: _____ (please print)

I am the person or the parent/legal guardian of the person named above. I understand that _____ (participant) is involved in a research project being undertaken by Jennifer Kelland, a researcher from the University of Alberta. She is proposing to take photographs of me/my child for the purpose of research. I may contact Jennifer Kelland if I have any questions or if I would like to find out more about this project.

I understand that: (choose either A, B or C):

A. The researcher, Jennifer Kelland, will use these images only as data for analysis. They will not be made public in any way.)

OR

B. These images may be used in the researcher’s dissertation, scholarly publications (including books), web postings and in presentations at academic conferences. Photographs will not reveal my/my child’s identity (i.e. photos may be electronically edited or cropped to remove identifying details). In captions and in discussions about the images, only pseudonyms will be used.

OR

C. These images that identify me/my child may be used in the researcher’s dissertation, scholarly publications (including books), web postings and in presentations at academic conferences. In captions and in discussions about the images, only pseudonyms will be used.

Restrictions, if any: _____

My signature below indicates that I consent* to the above-described collection, use and disclosure of photographs and captions.

Name of Person being photographed: _____ (please print)

Signature Person being photographed		Date:	
-------------------------------------	--	-------	--

*I understand that I may withdraw this consent at any time by contacting the researcher (Jennifer Kelland) or her supervisor (Dr. André Grace).

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The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by the Faculties of Education, Extension and Augustana Research Ethics Board (EEA REB) at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Chair of the EEA REB at (780) 492-3751.

APPENDIX G

Interview Guide –Interviews and Focus Group

I will start by going over the purpose of the study as described in the information letter:

My study area of study is adult education and learning, specifically women's experiences with learning online. I'm interested in those situations where your values, priorities, goals, relationships, responsibilities and the realities of your everyday life, as they relate to your learning, pull you in different directions. I am interested in hearing about what pulls you in different directions, how this influences your learning, and how you work with and through those situations to reach your learning goals.

After explaining the purpose of the study, I will review the demographic information (see Attachment B) collected from the participant to get an overview of her online learning history. I will confirm the basic chronology of her education and ask some questions to get additional details. These types of questions are harder to put into writing since terms are used differently in different contexts.

Demographic Form Questions

- What was the format of the online courses you took? (Self-directed, combination of online and face-to-face, entirely online, cohort based)
- What type(s) of technology were used? (Online discussion board such as WebCT, real-time text chats, real-time voice-over-IP sessions such as Elluminate, videoconferencing, instant messenger)
- Were there any face-to-face meetings? When were they scheduled? How many were there?

I will then ask each participant to arrange and share her photos in any order she would like keeping in mind that we may not have a chance to talk about each photo in detail. I will number or label photos with sticky notes to keep track of them as we talk, and for future reference. After the interview, I will write the numbers or labels on the backs of the photographs. I will use the following probes only as guides and will follow the thread of the participant's story, while at all times keeping in mind the purpose of the research.

Probes

Ask about what made you take this photo, how it illustrates your experiences as online learner, what is pulling you in this situation, how does that influence your learning, how do you respond to being pulled, how does it relate to the other photos you've taken.

- Which photo(s) represent your experiences most comprehensively?
- Were there any photos you would have liked to take but that you couldn't?
- What words would you use to describe your photos overall?

Guide for Online Focus Group

Themes and interview questions for the online focus group, if conducted, will be developed through an analysis of the data in the first and second interviews. The online focus group will be used to get feedback on my preliminary findings from participants and/or other women learning online.

APPENDIX H

January 25, 2010: Welcome!

Welcome! You have successfully joined the blog that will be used for this online focus group.

In order to ensure privacy, only focus group participants have access to this site. After the focus group is complete, I will remove the blog. However, you should be aware that the staff of WordPress can view blogs, if required, to resolve technical problems. It is unlikely that any problems will occur during our focus group discussion.

Please post a comment on this page in response to this welcome message. It can include a brief introduction of yourself. Be sure to tell us what screen name (user id) you'll be using.

Be aware that any information you post will be visible to all other members of the focus group. It is up to you to decide what information you feel comfortable sharing (name, location, program of study, etc). I have your personal information from your demographics form, so it isn't necessary for you to post it for me. Please avoid using the real names of people, agencies, institutions, or other identifiers to protect your privacy and theirs.

Please respect the confidentiality of the other participants when you are reading and responding to postings in this focus group. Do not share their experiences or personal information outside of this group.

February 1, 2010: Starting the discussion

My area of study is adult education and learning, specifically women's experiences with learning online. The first part of my thesis research was 6 photo interviews with women learning online. Now I'm conducting this focus group to get some additional perspectives.

I am particularly interested in those situations where your values, priorities, goals, relationships, responsibilities and the realities of your everyday life, pull you in different directions.

Rather than repeating the phrase "pulled in different directions" I'm going to use the term "tensions." In my research, I've defined "tensions" as "the messy spaces where complexities, contradictions and competing ideas, actions, expectations, values and emotions interact to produce opposition and opportunities."

Later, I will ask you to reflect on this definition, but for now, the important things for you to remember when you see the word "tensions" is that it, in this context, it doesn't have a

negative connotation. It just means feeling pulled in different directions. I'd like to hear how you feel about the tensions in and around your online learning.

Here's how I'd like to start the discussion:

1. Think about the situations related to your learning where your values, priorities, goals, relationships, responsibilities, and the realities of your everyday life pull you in different directions. In other words, identify the tensions in and around your online learning.
2. Please share one or two examples of these tensions. Be as specific and detailed in your examples as you can.
3. As others post their examples, please add your comments to their examples. Consider these questions:
 - Do their examples bring to mind other examples in your experience?
 - Have you experienced a similar situation?
 - Do you feel this situation is also a tension for you?

Again, specific and details comments will be most helpful.

February 2, 2010: Flexibility – what do you think?

Thanks for all the great comments and discussion so far. You've given me lots to think about, it is has only been a couple of days. I'm enjoying hearing your experiences, reading your responses to each other where you re-examine your own experiences, and thinking about the questions you've posed. I'm looking forward to more! I'm going to try to post a new question every couple of days to keep the discussion moving forward, but feel free to continue to respond to earlier posts as you read them.

From reading what you've written over the past two days, it seems like many things (for example, Tracy's furnace, Karen's sick family members, or Jessica's piles of laundry) can get in the way of your online courses. These interruptions or distractions seem to be particularly problematic for online learners, but isn't one of the reasons women chose online learning is to have flexibility to be available or to be at home when the things happen that need their attention?

It seems to me like online learners choose to study online because of the flexibility, among other reasons, yet having that flexibility can make it difficult to give school work the time and energy it requires.

I'd like to hear what you think about flexibility and online learning. Some of the questions that I'm exploring are:

- Am I correct that flexibility is one of the reasons online learning appeals to women in general and you in particular?

- Is it online learning really more flexible or is it more compatible with your lives for another reason?
- Is flexibility a benefit or a challenge or a myth?
- What makes online learning appear more flexible? Is it the lack of scheduled class time (though many programs have synchronous online meetings)? Is it the more self-directed nature of some courses?

Feel free to answer any of these questions or to share any of your experiences that come to mind when you read what I've written and the other participants have shared. If you have more questions to pose, that's good too!

*** One administrative note: If you haven't already subscribed to this blog by clicking the button at the top right side of this post, please do that now. It will ensure you get a reminder every time I post a new discussion topic. I assure you that you won't be flooded with messages every time a new comment is posted. You'll only get notification when I start a new discussion. You might also get one message confirming you want to be subscribed.

If you want to get updated every time a new comment is posted, you can click the check box when you post a comment. Be aware, you will get a large number of messages.***

February 8, 2010: The learning online part of online learning

We've talked a lot about tensions related to fitting online learning in to your busy lives. I'd like to now change things a little bit and to have a look at your actual learning while online. What tensions exist within your online classes or your online learning environment? Here are a few comments that people have already made that focus more on the learning experience:

Barbara mentioned communication styles: "One extra [tension] I had involved communication with other students online, especially because styles of communication came up that were sometimes intimidating. I found that usually the ones to bow out were female."

[Removed because this participant did not complete the required consent form so her contributions cannot be used in this study.]

Barbara talked about workload: "Online (asynchronous) appears flexible because the choice of when to engage is up to the student. Deadlines still existed. I did find that it is more time consuming because of the amount of independent study. This may be dependent on the program though."

How did you feel about your online classes? What works and doesn't work in that learning environment for you? How does online learning meet your expectations about learning and how does it surprise you?

February 8, 2010: Focus group schedule

I know everyone is busy and I appreciate the time you've already taken to participate in my research. I wanted to let you know what to expect for the rest of the focus group. I just posted a new discussion topic this morning. I'm planning to post another new topic on Wednesday and one on Friday. Early next week I'll post the last topic which will be about your experiences in the focus group – what worked, what didn't, what I could do differently. So, I expect the discussion to end by the middle of next week. Thanks again for all the time you've put in to sharing your experiences and answering my questions.

February 10, 2010: Tensions and online learning

I'd like to another perspective on tensions and online learning. I'd to look at how these tensions are unique to online learning. The first question is, of course, are they unique to the online learning context?

Tracy points out her classmates faced similar challenges: "I remember talking to my peers in person at the meeting when we all gave our final presentations and we all faced the same challenges; mostly time pressures & work pressures. I thought I was the only student who sometimes thought they wouldn't make it, but that wasn't the case at all. In fact, three of my peers put-off their graduation for another year, because they just couldn't complete the work in time. When I heard that, I realized how all students, distance and F2F ones, face similar challenges."

So, my question for you, is: are there tensions that are unique to online learning? Are some tensions intensified or diminished by online learning?

Or, another way to look at it, how is online learning different from other forms of learning?

February 12, 2010: Technology tensions

We've looked at the "online" and "learning" parts of online learning, but another important piece is the technology that makes this type of learning possible. I'm interested in the hardware (computer equipment, webcams, Internet connection, etc) and the software (computer programs, online interfaces, course management systems (Blackboard, eLearning, WebCT, etc)). What tensions do you experience related to computers or technology tools? How do you deal with these tension? How does technology affect your learning online?

Some questions to think about, and answer if you'd like:

- Who selected the computer hardware and software you have on your computer(s) or you need for your course? Does this create tensions?
- Do you use a laptop or PDA, how does that influence your learning?

- Do you require any special hardware or software for you online learning? How do that influence your learning?

February 14, 2010: The Focus Group Experience

From my research, it seems that using a private blog as a focus group platform is unique. Since this approach hasn't been used before, I may write something about how I set it up. I'd like to be able to share how it worked for you too. So, please share your comments about participating in the focus group. If there are things you would recommend changing, please share them too!

Here are some questions to consider, or you can just share your own comments about the experience. Thank you.

I had a long list of questions, but I realize that you will address all the issues that are important to you. So, I've summarized my questions in to three questions:

- Is there anything you would recommend changing if I was to do this again?
- What you want me to keep the same if I did this again?
- Is there anything else you think I should know about participating in this focus group?

Thanks in advance for your feedback.

February 14, 2010: Final thoughts

This is just a place to share any final thoughts on the topic of the tensions women experience when learning online. If there's anything else you'd like to share, please add it here. And, if there's anything you've learned or realized from participating in this group, please share it here too. Thanks.

February 14, 2010: What happens next?

This is the last official post of the focus group. (There will be one more "for interest only" post where I'll answer some questions I've received by email this week). Thanks for your willingness to share your experiences over the last couple of weeks. I've found it really interesting to hear your stories, and you've certainly made me think, which is great.

Here's what will happen now:

1. I'll leave this site open until the end of this week (February 21) if you want to continue to add your comments and insights.

2. Over the next week or so, I'll be emailing you individually to follow up on some details from your demographics forms.
3. After the site closes, I'll be analyzing the focus group discussion transcripts. I'll compile it with my interview data, and then I'll see what kind of answers I get to my research questions. Then I'll finish writing my thesis. My plan is to finish defending my thesis and making required revisions by this time next year.

If you are interested, I'll continue to update you on my research over the next months. When I finish writing my thesis, I can share it with you, if you'd like.

If you have any questions about what happens next, or about my research in general, post them here and I'll do my best to answer them for you.

February 21, 2010: More about my experiences

Early in the focus group, Karen emailed me to follow questions about my experiences learning online in response to my introductory post. I didn't want to post too much about my experiences until everyone had a chance to share their experiences. Now, I'll try to respond to her questions for everyone who interested:

Would I be right in concluding that you did not have a rich online experience in the DE courses? It makes me wonder why my strongest, most enduring collegial bonds came from my online [graduate] program, while the opposite seems true for you...

I probably wouldn't characterize my experiences as "rich," especially since I now know what an online course can be.

Did your courses involve online student interaction? If so, what kind of media did you use? Were your interactions graded, tallied, or otherwise evaluated in the course(s)?

We used WebCT and Sitescape depending on the professor. Some classes had teleconference components, too. Most courses used this format: read the "lecture notes" (written by the professor), read the assigned readings, participate in a group discussion (either whole class or small groups), submit individual or small group assignments (usually a compilation of the week's discussion). I think we did get marks for participation, and I did participate because I felt I got out what I put in to a course. There was usually a folder for "off-topic/social" discussions but it was rarely used.

Did you go through the online courses with a cohort? Did you ever meet any of the online students face-to-face?

No I was not part of a cohort. Most students were studying part-time, and I was a full-time student. I did meet some students face-to-face. They were the other full-time students studying on campus. We would meet to discuss our online courses in person when we couldn't figure out the assignments online. The only student I'm still in touch with from the program was someone I met in a face-to-face class, though we did take online courses together too.

I explored the differences in student online experiences in past research projects. This continues to fascinate me. What is the key to enjoying online learning?

I think your questions have identified some of the things that make online learning enjoyable: face-to-face meetings, cohorts, rich learning experiences, appropriate media, but also skilled professors, interesting content and engaging assignments.

I hope this answers your questions about my experiences.

Jenna