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DISTANCE LEARNERS' USE OF SUPPORT SERVICES

BY

DIANNE L. CONRAD (C)

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF EDUCATION.

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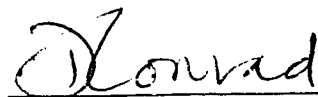
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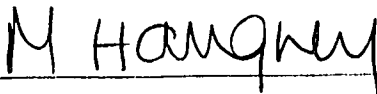
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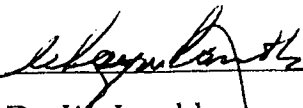
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The undersigned certify they have read, and recommend to the
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of Education in Adult and Higher Education.

Dr. M. Haughey

Dr. D. Collett

Dr. W. Lamble

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ABSTRACT

Distance education has in recent years become a larger part of Alberta's educational fabric, in part due to the geography of the province. The issue of learner isolation is one of the most pressing concerns for distance educators in examining the patterns of learner interaction with a variety of support systems throughout their individualized learning experiences. The purpose of this study was to examine learners' use of support services.

Nine learners, selected from a sample of 50 who were currently enrolled in either their first or second courses in a distance education institution, participated in taped semi-structured interviews that lasted approximately ninety minutes.

Data included the transcription of each interview, interview notes, and journal observations and insights. Further reflections arising from the initial data analysis were also recorded. From these data, several significant themes were identified.

The findings of the study indicated that distance learners accepted the responsibility for their learning; that they wanted to control their learning; and that they were detached from their learning.

In accepting responsibility for their learning, learners exercised a sense of ownership over their learning that reflected their understanding of their own learning styles. Similarly, the nine respondents' desire to have control of their learning contributed to their initial decisions to

engage in distance education courses, guided their educational decision-making during the progress of their courses, and allowed them to choose their levels of commitment to their courses.

Learners demonstrated a business-like sense of detachment from their learning. Their learning experiences and their interaction with the institution were evaluated for their contribution to the attainment of learners' course credits.

The pattern of learners' use of support services was strongly linked to their views of themselves of learners and their general approach to a learning situation. As learners, the respondents conveyed a sense of individualism, privacy, and dispassion. Their use of available support services was well-organized and carefully constructed to facilitate their learning to the degree that they judged such assistance to be necessary to their success.

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As learners who, generally speaking, have been schooled in the "traditional" way—that is, mandatory attendance in teacher-led classrooms—we have, over the years of our educational histories, developed a familiarity with "the traditional pattern of institutionally-based childhood education" (Moore and Waldron, 1981) that predisposes our learning framework.

In such a framework, classroom learners draw structure from their classroom surroundings. Learners' assignment to, and even the placement of, a certain desk or chair may contribute to their sense of belonging, security, or comfort in that classroom. The presence of sets of textbooks or resource materials may enhance learners' comfort levels in addition to contributing to their academic progress, as might their access to television, radio, videocassettes or audiocassettes, magazines, pictures, art exhibits and displays of various sorts of works. Learners may also draw support from a type of routine, such as having access to a familiar study room.

Less tangibly, the ambience of that learning environment—the sense of collegiality and familiarity that develops among a group of people who experience an extended physical proximity to each other

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(notwithstanding the occasional friction or rancor among classmates)—also serves as a support to learners. In addition to the obvious degree of social interaction and personalizing that exists in a classroom, peers form a problem-solving network for each other—a source of feedback and encouragement. Some learners just need someone to talk to about their own work in a most casual form of reinforcement.

The combinations of people, places, and things that help learners as they learn by providing them with either psychological comfort or physical resources constitute types of support that, when supplied by an institution, are referred to as "support services." Such supports, characterized by Smith and Small as learners' "helping hands" (p. 137), surround learners with a sense of their learning mission and reflect their accomplishments, thereby creating for them an environment that is safe, familiar, and gratifying. Learners can also receive support in their learning from sources outside the institution, for example, from friends or family.

The need for a sense of comfort and security in the learning environment continues to be important for adult learners (Knowles, 1980) as their return to educational pursuits after a lengthy absence often causes them feelings of anxiety about their performance as learners.. Similarly, the presence of such supports has been identified by researchers in distance education as necessary for distance learners' success in *their* learning experiences (Meakin, 1982; Caron, 1982; Rekkedal, 1982).

But distance education *does* separate learners from both their peers and their source of instruction. And while it is now recognized not to be a "discrete genre" (Garrison, p. 8), distance education does differ from traditional education in many ways. These are outlined by Garrison (1989) as he attempts to define distance education by providing a set of criteria by which to judge its process:

1. Distance education implies that the majority of educational communication between (among) teacher and student(s) occurs noncontiguously.

2. Distance education must include two-way communication between (among) teacher and student(s) for the purpose of facilitating and supporting the educational process.

3. Distance education uses technology to mediate the necessary two-way communication. (p. 6)

Although distance education emphasizes in both definition and reality the separation of instructor from learner, Smith and Small (1982) point out that distance education should be a "form of independent study, not a sentence to solitary confinement" (p. 137). In outlining, however, various types of supports that bolster and cushion our learning in traditional learning situations but are more difficult to access in distance education—casual verbal feedback from the instructor; individualized advice; helpful interpretation of materials from both

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instructor and fellow learners; collegial affirmation of verbally-expressed opinions and of exhibited written work—Sewart (1982) actually underscores the potential for a sense of learning "aloneness" in distance education.

Given that potential, Sewart goes on to point out that the number of "linking" functions that exist between the educational system and the learner—those roles normally filled by a variety of people—are in fact *more* important in distance education because of the physical separation of the student from the institution and the resultant "impersonal teaching package" (p. 28) which becomes the distance learners' representation of the institution. As he explains: "While the package may successfully incorporate the basic subject matter, it does not admit of the almost infinite variation of advice and support that has been part of the role of the face-to-face teacher" (p. 27). Moreover, because we as learners have been nurtured in a primarily pedagogical system, one that stresses content and product instead of tasks and process (Coldeway, 1982), we are unused to assuming a high degree of self-sufficiency in our learning, and therefore are trained to rely on the presence of certain levels of external support.

For whatever reasons learners choose to study at a distance, and however independent they may judge themselves, as learners, to be, the fact of their enrollment with a distance institution usually requires them to proceed through their courses alone, doing individualized study to some degree. The issue of the "loneliness of the long distance learner" (Forsythe, quoted by Croft, 1987) has been addressed in distance education

literature at length as it is closely tied to the important questions of drop-out and student success rate (Meakin, 1982; Coldeway, 1986; Hotchkis and Nelson, 1988; Wilkinson and Sherman 1989).

Most distance institutions offer, as a part of their student services divisions, various types of supports for their learners. These include the provision of personnel to actively aid learners in some aspect of their learning—telephone tutors, for example, to assist learners through the content of their courses; seminar leaders to conduct short-term group activities (usually a necessarily optional activity in a distance education course); or counsellors to provide learners with help in educational decision-making or personal matters. Support services may also include the provision of resources for learners to form themselves into study groups, study circles, or study cells on a local or regional level. Some distance education institutions facilitate computer-mediated communication among their learners (Caron, 1982; Smith and Small, 1982; Meakin, 1982). Studies show, however, that distance learners' use of these established systems of support varies, and in some cases, is minimal (Thompson, 1989; Brindley and Jean-Louis, 1990).

Learners' patterns of use of available support remain unclear to the institutional providers of distance education. Why do learners *not* access the systems of support at their institution? From what areas do they obtain the support that is thought to be important to their learning success? What are *their* perceptions of the array of support services that exist to aid them in their learning? Those questions were posed to a group of distance learners taking their first or second distance education

course from a distance education institution, Athabasca University, in Alberta.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to examine the nature of the support services offered to students enrolled in distance education courses by reviewing the literature on support services in distance learning and by conducting a study to determine the perceptions of students actively involved in distance learning. The research question, which asked "What use did learners make of support services while enrolled in distance education courses from a distance institution?" included several more specific subproblems:

1. What expectations did learners have of the learning experience offered by the institution, prior to enrollment?

2. What kinds of support services were made available to these learners, and to what extent were they available?

3. How, and to what extent, was use made of available support services by learners?

4. What judgements do distance learners make of the help rendered them in meeting their learning needs by their use of support services?

5. What kinds of support services would distance learners like to have been made available to them?

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Background to the Problem

In 1972, the Worth Report addressed a wide range of educational issues facing Albertans for consideration in the decade beyond. The concept of lifelong learning was an exciting emphasis of the report, and subsequent advocacy of the concept of lifelong learning has been strong and well-nurtured in Alberta.

Athabasca University accepts as its mandate the concept of facilitating lifelong educational opportunities to residents across the province. Established by Order in Council in June, 1970, "to address the greatly increased demand for university places" and also to "emphasize undergraduate education" in light of the rapid growth of the research-oriented University of Alberta, Athabasca University weathered several years of uncertainty, insecurity and confusion (Paul, 1986).

In 1972, Athabasca University was redefined by Order in Council 1986/72, (3). Its "special role" was described by founding president Dr. T. C. Byrne in *Athabasca University: The Evolution of Distance Education* (1989) as "that of an undergraduate institution dedicated to meeting the needs of the part-time learner aged anywhere from eighteen to more than eighty years" (p. 52). Today, Athabasca University students are able, without leaving their jobs or their hometowns, to enrol in a variety of courses and programs to either begin, or totally complete, their postsecondary education.

In theory, the nature of distance learning in most cases involves a degree of isolation. In Alberta, this is true of most rural distance learners

and also, in part and in degree, of many urban distance learners. Learners may complete courses by correspondence, working in their own homes, or they may be involved in a teleconferencing situation from a regional centre where they may be either the only student or a member of a small group of students. The isolation factor is a major constituent of distance education, and can be lessened somewhat by the technologies which are also a part of distance education. Technologies, however, are themselves isolating and alienating to students, and must be tempered by the availability of human contact.

Distance education literature recognizes the fact that the bridge of human contact that support services provide is an essential component to successful distance learning (Meakin, 1982). Distance institutions, anxious to improve their seemingly poor completion rates, are researching all the variables involved in their students' learning experiences. In the area of student support, *what* is offered is tangible and obvious to administrators and researchers; the questions of *how* those services are perceived by the learner, and, more importantly, *why* or *why not* the learner chooses to use available services, are much more difficult questions to answer.

Significance of the Study

The recent interest in distance education by Alberta's educational institutions has been powered in part by the concept of equity in education. Since Alberta Education encouraged investigation into the

nature of equity in education in 1985, several government studies have considered the implications of the concept of a fair and accessible education for all Albertans, regardless of location or geography. At levels ranging from kindergarten to Grade 12 to postgraduate studies, educators are reaching out to rural populations to reduce the disadvantaging effects on education of the province's overwhelming geography.

Another important and practical motivation that underlies the development of distance education programs is the changing demography of postsecondary students. The aging babyboom population and a declining birthrate are two factors that have contributed to striking changes in the student population, causing a decrease in the number of young, fulltime students enrolling in postsecondary education. Corresponding to their decline in numbers is the growth of the part-time sector—returning middle-aged students now contemplating career change, promotion, or pre-retirement interests.

Members of this sector of the population are newly involved in education in significantly increasing numbers. Their educational decisions are driven in part by the recent tendency of industry and business towards professionalization, specialization, and an even higher level of entry skills. Many factors, however, combine to prevent these eager learners, in many cases, from leaving their homes or positions: the desire to maintain the position currently held; financial need; commitment to family and community life. Hence the attractiveness of distance education courses and programs throughout the province.

Marian Croft (1987) refers to the findings of research at Laurentian University that the loneliness of distance learning is remedied in part by tutor/student contact. Similar research from the Open University in Britain and Athabasca University here in Alberta indicates that this form of support for the distance learner is most crucial to maximize learners' chances of success. At Athabasca University, personnel at the Student Services division and researchers at the Centre for Distance Education have investigated the twin questions of student support services and student success (Coldeway, 1982a, 1986; Brindley, 1987; Brindley and Jean-Louis, 1989).

This study focuses on the role of student support services to another large cohort of distance learners—the urban distance learner. Accounting for more than half of the enrollees in courses at Athabasca University, urban distance learners have the unique opportunity of choice, and they have chosen to learn in the individualized, often-isolated style that defines distance education.

What of these learners? Given the fact of their initial move away from a traditional learning environment, what connection do they perceive that they have with their distance institution's network of support systems? What use do they make of what is available? What types of support sustain their learning, and where do they get that support from?

To know the answers to these questions is to be able to build or improve the framework of the "safety net" structure that must exist for

this large population of learners. All facets of the distance institution's
operations are affected by learners' ultimate use of its support systems.
Curriculum and materials must anticipate and complement learners'
need for support; university personnel must be cognizant of and
receptive to learners' expectations of support services, and the
problems—both real and imagined, both practical and emotional—that
occur as a result of their attempts to acquire that support. Tutors and
professors also must have an awareness of their learners' expectations of
them so they can be familiar with the systems necessary to accommodate
learners' needs. Finally, administators and programmers must be able to
plan for the development and maintenance of support systems that
coalesce with the expressed needs of their learners.

The information provided by this study will reflect learners'
knowledge of, and preferences for, those support services.

Definition of Terms

For purposes of clarity, in this study, the term "support services"
will refer to any structure that provides any type of assistance in
learning—either human support of an interactive, emotional or physical
nature, or support from physical resources—to learners involved in
distance education courses.

I made the following assumptions in the study:

1. The adult learners in the study were responsibly and conscientiously involved in their learning experience, and as such, demonstrated a reasonable will to achieve their own goals.

2. The adult learners in the study were aware of their individual strengths and weaknesses as learners, and as such, made informed statements about the nature of the support services that would benefit them.

3. The presence of support services was a positive element in distance learning, and the use of support services could contribute positively to learners' performance.

4. Respondents answered questions truthfully and openly.

Delimitations

The study was delimited to nine students from one distance education institution who agreed to participate in the study. The group from which the participants were chosen represented the middle 60% of the institution's students—students who were not designated by the institution either as "guaranteed" to succeed or as likely destined to fail. The study was also delimited to urban learners. The study did not attempt to correlate learners' success in their courses with their expressed perceptions of, or their use and knowledge of, support services. Finally,

environments different from the system that was studied nor indeed to learners in the system who were not interviewed.

Limitations

The study was limited by the researcher's capabilities in the interview process and in the subsequent analysis of the data. It was also limited by the ability of the respondents to identify their sources of necessary assistance and support, and by the accuracy of their memories which may have suppressed the notion of their support needs if their studies were successful.

Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed clearly, at the outset of the study, of the nature and purpose of the research, first by letter and then by telephone. They were assured of confidentiality and were given the option to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were guaranteed anonymity through the use of pseudonyms, and their real names did not appear in any draft of this study.

The thesis is organized in the following manner. Chapter 1 presents the context of the problem, the problem statement and its subproblems, its background, assumptions, delimitations and limitations. It defines relevant terms and outlines the significance of the study.

Chapter 2 outlines the research methods used in the study and the design of the study.

Chapter 3 presents the data from the interviews with the study's participants. The data, presented according to the three large categories that reflected their logical distribution, are preceded by short descriptions of the participants. This chapter concludes with the presentation of several themes that emerged from the data.

Chapter 4 opens with a summary and then presents a reflection on some of the relevant literature in this area. Then follows my personal reflections on the findings, and a discussion of implications for practice and implications for further research. A short, concluding paragraph ends the chapter.

METHOD AND DESIGN

In order to examine distance learners' levels of awareness and knowledge of the support services available to them, and to investigate learners' subsequent use of those support services, I chose a qualitative design for this study. Using an interpretative approach to analyze the data I collected would provide "a concrete, vivid, meaningful flavor that often proves far more convincing to a reader—another researcher, a policy-maker—than pages of numbers" (Miles and Huberman, 1984, p. 15). It was my intent to give life to these learners' stories of their distance learning experiences as I followed the unfolding of their interactions with Athabasca University. Accordingly, learners, while telling stories of their own experiences, recounted pages of "rich descriptions" as they responded to my research questions. The relaying of their stories in a qualitative study allowed the fullest and most meaningful unfolding of their learning experiences.

Selection of Participants

Permission was sought from Athabasca University to interview between eight and twelve adult learners who were either currently

Personnel at Athabasca University's Distance Education Research Centre generated a list of approximately 50 suitable participants from the database. The learners named on the list met the following criteria:

1. their course registrations reflected a variety of subject areas;

2. they were enrolled in either their first or second course at Athabasca University;

3. they lived in Edmonton or close to Edmonton;

4. they were considered by Athabasca University to be part of the 60% of the student population who were deemed "likely to succeed";

5. they reflected a variety of individual and personal realities, in that:

> a. there were both male and female registrants
>
> b. there were registrants of varying ages
>
> c. there were both married and single registrants.

Because I hoped to ultimately interview about ten learners, I chose twenty-five names from the list, thereby allowing for the possibility of refusals. The twenty-five names that were chosen reflected the range of the conditions above. I felt that it was important to try to avoid choosing peo   who were too similar in background, age, and marital status in orde.   ata that reflected the broadest types of experiences. I wante   over a number of subject areas, again, to broaden the

scope of the data, and I specified learners taking only their first or second courses so that I could be reasonably assured of speaking to people who could remember their experiences with veracity and authenticity, rather than with a seasoned resignation or hardness.

Letters requesting their participation were then sent to the learners (see Appendix I). The letter described the study, detailed the nature and scope of the desired participation, guaranteed participants' anonymity, and assured them of their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

After a period of seven to ten days, I called those people to whom letters had been sent and described the project to them on the telephone, reiterating the information in the letter and answering any questions that they had.

Three of the telephone numbers that had been supplied were incorrect and two letters were returned by the post office, each indicating that the person was no longer at that address. I attempted to contact several persons at their work numbers and found that one man was out of town on business. Several of those who were contacted declined to participate for various reasons. One woman was just about to begin a new assignment at work; another was dealing with a convalescent . parent; another felt too consumed by her coursework. In sum, several indicated that they were just too busy.

Two people, after listening to my explanation of the study, felt that they had nothing to contribute on that topic, and, in saying that, did not elaborate on their use or non-use of support services. One person, again

after listening to my explanation, simply replied that she was not interested.

Of the twenty-five people initially identified, nine persons agreed to be interviewed. Brief descriptions of these nine respondents are provided in the section "Snapshots" at the beginning of Chapter 3. The snaɟ ..ot descriptions itemize the variety of situations both personal and educational that characterized the respondents.

Data Collection

Merriam and Simpson (1984, ɼ 62) suggested that the interview process develops "rapport and [gains] the widest range of data." I felt that the existence of this level of trust between the participants and me was necessary in order to address the questions outlined in this study. To give the participants the opportunity to respond as fully and broadly as possible to my queries, I decided to use a semi-structured interview process.

The semi-structured interview design focused on several broad research questions that loosely formatted each interview and allowed me to question each participant in predetermined areas. However, the interview format was open enough to accommodate relevant and important areas of interest and concern that arose during the actual interview. Hence I was able to adapt each line of questioning to the rhythm of the respondent, probing where necessary, following the direction of the particular story as it was related.

The interviews took place in various locations according to the preference of the respondent. Five interviews were conducted in the respondents' homes. The remaining four interviews were conducted in a quiet conference room at my workplace.

At the beginning of each interview, I read to the participant a consent form outlining the nature and purpose of the study. The participant was then asked to sign the form. Each did so willingly. I invited participants to ask questions of clarification or concern.

As each interview was to be taped electronically, I explained the taping process prior to the interview. The nature of the semi-structured format was also explained so that the participant would have an understanding of the procedure that was going to occur.

Each interview was successfully taped and I made notes during the interview of interesting points to be returned to in conversation, expounded on, or clarified at a later point. I also jotted down insights that were prompted by respondents' remarks.

After each session, I recorded my feelings and reactions to the interview in a journal. These data were considered in conjunction with the transcriptions of the tapes during the analysis of the data. Reflections on the flavor and success of each interview also helped me tailor the style and direction of subsequent interviews.

Pilot Study

One of the principal intents of the semi-structured interview design was to allow modification and expansion of the central framework according to the direction and quality of responses that my questioning elicited. An initial pilot study contributed invaluable experience toward this end and familiarized me with the interview process.

The importance of interview locale became evident, as the pilot was conducted in the participant's home, and the interview process there was subjected to several interruptions.

The varying quality of questions became obvious; directional, closed questions did not evoke sufficient response.

I became aware of verbal "triggers" in questions—stimuli that could influence and direct the participant's response. Similarly, I noticed that my verbal and non-verbal reactions were factors that impacted on the participant's response pattern.

I strived to maintain a balance between friendly rapport and concerned solicitation. The nature of this balance varied from respondent to respondent as the subjective interactive nature of the interview process would suggest, but my discovery of this phenomenon created in me a vigilance and constant awareness.

The pilot study also facilitated technical discoveries about the placement of the tape recorder and the handling of papers and

notetaking. The interview process became smoother and more efficient over time.

The Interviews

Although the locations of the interviews were divided about equally between respondents' homes and my workplace, the structure of each interview was very similar. In each setting, the respondent and I sat alone at a table in a quiet area.

As I set up the tape recorder and arranged papers, there were a few minutes of introductory small talk to "warm" the atmosphere and set both of us at ease.

At the beginning of the session, I reviewed with each participant the purpose and nature of the study, presented the consent form for signature after reading it aloud, outlined the ethics issues involved in research, and explained to the participant the format of the interview and the research process that would follow the initial interview. Most of the participants accepted this explanation without question, although several enquired about the type of degree I was pursuing and my own program of study.

The first few general questions established the position of the respondents in their program and their courses. The questions then addressed their experiences as learners, from their initial contact with the institution to their progress through their course or courses. The interview moved from questions requiring factual and situational

responses to those that required thought, opinion, and, at times, conjecture.

A participant's revelation of a particularly trying experience, or a difficult decision, prompted me to focus on the impact of such a condition on the learning that was taking place. Participants were asked at several times, in different phraseology in different questions, to reflect on their learning experiences. The depth and pacing of each questioning technique depended on the individual respondent, and varied from interview to interview.

At times when I was aware that the respondent was describing at length the effects of a particular problem or situation, I made no attempt to interject or interrupt the story that was being told. I felt that doing so might lessen the respondent's enthusiasm for relating the learning experiences that were important to him or her, and could thereby impair the sense of trust and openness that had been established by good listening throughout the interview.

Interviews lasted from one hour to one and three-quarters hours. At the conclusion of each interview, I indicated that the interview was just about finished, and asked for any sort of comment that the respondent wished to make. At this point, several participants rephrased key points; others summarized their feelings about their learning experiences; others simply had nothing more to say.

The respondents were uniformly polite, cooperative, and more than willing to share their experiences. In the process of answering my questions, several of the participants expressed wonder and fascination at

the reflections they were actually having about their learning. Several stated that this was the first time they had contemplated the breadth of their learning experiences.

I explained to each respondent that a copy of the interview transcription would be sent out when completed. During this time period, one of the interviewees called to enquire when his transcription would be arriving; there was no other response from the remaining participants before or after their copies were mailed to them.

Analysing the Data

Preliminary analysis of the data began immediately following each interview. While making journal entries, I noted ideas and concepts and referred them to the relevant interview (see Appendix III). At times, similarities in the data and differences among them were obvious and were jotted down.

The subsequent transcription process brought forth new insights which were also noted. During the lengthy transcription of data, broad concepts and patterns that emerged from the participants' responses were sometimes found in varying degrees of likeness in the responses of another learner. Jotted notes on the transcriptions reflected this conceptual bridging of data.

Following the full transcription of all the data, I began to categorize the data. Miles and Huberman (1984) describe the categorization procedure which uses codes as a means of classifying words:

[Codes] are *retrieval and organizing devices* that

allow the analyst to spot quickly, pull out, then cluster all

the segments relating to the particular question, hypothesis,

concept, or theme. Clustering sets the stage for analysis.

(p. 56)

Descriptive codes were applied to chunk the data into key concepts.

The descriptive categories initially sprang from the broad research

questions and bore a close resemblance to the format of the first

interviews. As discussed by Miles and Huberman, however, the coding

process is developmental: "[Codes] can happen at *different times* during

analysis; some get created and used at the start—others come later—

typically the descriptive ones first and the inferential ones later" (p. 57).

Allowing the initial descriptive codes to develop according to the

data permitted me to remain "open-minded and more context-sensitive"

(p. 57). And as the coding process continued, new and different categories

were added to existing categories. Categories that developed later tended

to represent a degree of inference on my part as I became familiar with

the patterns of response and the larger concepts that underlay recounted

incidents. Some chunks of data fell logically into two categories and were

classified as such.

At the end of the categorization procedure, the data were grouped

into several logical categories. A further grouping together of similar

topic areas resulted in the three major categories under which the data

are displayed in Chapter 3: becoming involved with Athabasca University, being a distance learner, and obtaining support.

The process of itemizing the data for display provided a framework for the continued analysis of the transcribed material. The work was, however, difficult and often frustrating. Respondents' comments were often rambling and circular. Fairly lengthy recollections of events often interrupted or preceded key revelations. Overall, the learning process is a complicated one, and the respondents' articulation of their individual processes was correspondingly complex and difficult to compartmentalize or synopsize.

From the eventual coalescence of the more numerous but smaller categories into the three larger categories, the process of constant contemplation and questioning of the respondents' comments led to the eventual emergence of the study's central themes.

The data at this stage of analysis were examined for undercurrents and meaning. Respondents' comments were examined in conjunction with my notes and jotted observations to discover what underlying commonalities threaded through their distance learning experiences. The emergence of patterns in the data was substantiated by further reference to the transcribed data. Finally, these themes were checked with the respondents in telephone conversation.

Data Trustworthiness

I used several techniques to ensure the credibility and dependability of the data: member check, peer consultation, and an audit trail. Each is discussed below.

Member check. The dependability of the data was ascertained by having each participant review a copy of the transcribed interview. My interpretation of nuance and emphasis in each respondent's speech was indicated in the transcription through the use of capital letters and underscoring. Confirmation of themes was obtained in telephone discussions with each respondent.

Peer consultation. I consulted several of my peers involved in distance education as instructional designers, tutors, instructors, and administrators for their responses to the study's findings. In confirming the trustworthiness of the data, supportive colleagues confirmed the data as it was presented in several of the transcripts. Colleagues also affirmed the understandings revealed by my analysis and shared with me some of their own similar observations. I found that their reactions to the difficulties and complexities of the analytic process provided valuable support and affirmation of my work.

An in-depth review of the transcripts by my supervisor confirmed the emergence of the categories and resultant themes.

The credibility of the findings was also validated by the presence in the literature of experiences similar to those reported by this study's respondents.

Audit trail. Throughout the interview process, I documented the collection of data by keeping a reflective journal which detailed my thoughts, insights, and perceptions of each interview. Following each actual interview, I tried to capture the emotions that had been prompted by the experience of the interview, and reflected on the presentation of that particular respondent. The journal also served as an outlet for my responses to the data analysis process, recording my responses to the collected data as they began to unfold and take shape through transcription.

During this lengthy period, the concerns, frustrations, and anxieties that often accompany such work were detailed as well. At times when I shared my concerns with my peers, their helpful responses and advice contributed to my sense of perspective and and helped me present a "fresh" face and objective ear to each respective interviewee.

CHAPTER III

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Introduction

The central question of this study was: "What use did learners make of support services while enrolled in distance education courses from a distance institution?" My investigation of this phenomenon necessitated a set of secondary questions that focussed on learners' initial expectations of their distance learning experience, on the kinds of support services that learners were aware of and the extent to which those support services were available to learners, on learners' judgements of the contribution that their use of available support services had made to their learning process, and learners' reflections about what types of support services they would have *liked* to have had available to them.

The resultant discussions of respondents' distance learning experiences are reported in three broad sections: learners' involvement with Athabasca University, their understanding of themselves as learners, and their use of support services. Each of these three sections contains a number of related categories.

Several themes that emerged from the analysis of the data are presented at the end of the chapter. The first part of Chapter 3, entitled

"Snapshots," is a collection of brief descriptions of each of the nine respondents in the order in which they were interviewed.

Snapshots

Brenda is a 42 year old married woman who had recently relocated to the city from another major centre where she was employed as a medical administrator. Both of the distance education courses she has taken are administration courses, related to the career area she hopes to re-enter.

Jim is a retired instructor who taught at a technical institution for 25 years. He has taken two distance education courses in areas of interest to him in his retirement—computers and management. I interviewed Jim in his home as he babysat his grandson, and our discussion was very relaxed and convivial. Jim's learning has become an important hobby for him, as has his winter travelling.

Mary is a 32 year old elementary school teacher, married with no children. I interviewed her in her home. Energetic and articulate, Mary had been considering a career change for some time and had embarked · on distance studies as the first step towards that end. She was still unsure of her career direction but felt that she was "covering her bases" by taking university courses.

Lee, a 37 year old single woman, was completing her language requirement through an Athabasca University distance education course for transfer to another institution. Lee was employed fulltime in a professional office and was in the process of upgrading her qualifications to change careers within her field. Her French course was her first distance learning experience.

Fran was a 39 year old single woman who was taking two distance education courses to fulfill the elective component of a professional program in another institution in which she was enrolled as a distance student. She had considerable experience with distance learning as she was more than half way through the other program. Fran was employed fulltime in a medical setting but hoped that her studies would lead to a career change for her.

Peter, 40, married, was an accountant taking his second distance education course towards an undergraduate degree. His decision to return to school was prompted by job dissatisfaction; his employer had told him that a degree—any degree—was necessary in order to move within his field.

Donna, a 37 year old married woman, worked fulltime in a clerical/computer position. She suffered from a tendon condition in her hands that required her to wear supportive splints on her wrists. Writing was very difficult for Donna, more so at some times than at

others. Because her disability was thought to be job-related, she felt that further education was the key to career change and hence an easier life. Donna was taking two courses from Athabasca University and had studied at other postsecondary institutions as she pursued an undergraduate degree.

George, married with a family, was a 27 year old professional in the Canadian military. He had a military-oriented background, and had received an undergraduate degree from a military college. He had taken two distance education courses from Athabasca University towards career enhancement as he anticipated leaving the military for a civilian position. George's extensive postsecondary background and his position as an officer created in him a high level of assertiveness and confidence, and he participated quite actively and lengthily in the interview process.

Don, a 26 year old unmarried man with a fulltime position as a laborer, also contributed a lengthy interview. Don answered all my questions very assertively and enthusiastically, punctuating his replies with both physical gestures and anecdotes. Don was completing his language requirement for another institution by taking a French course at Athabasca. His move to distance learning was a last-ditch attempt to qualify for an undergraduate degree from a traditional institution.

Findings of the Study

The respondents' discussions of learning began, as did their
interviews, with details of their course history that have been synopsized
in the descriptions in the previous section. The data that are presented
in this section document, in a chronological fashion, the learners' stories
of their involvement with Athabasca University, their motivations,
their expectations, and the problems that they encountered.

Becoming Involved with Athabasca University

An initial question probed the respondents' choice of a distance
learning institution for their studies. In telling the stories of their learning,
participants reflected upon the nature of their involvement with Athabasca
University as a system. They detailed their experiences as they first became
involved with the university, as they received their initial information about
their courses, and as they obtained materials for their studies.

<u>Motivation: Why distance education? Why Athabasca University?</u>

In describing their personal learning experiences, the respondents
centred on motivational factors, on what it was that directed them to
their distance studies.

Peter chose the Bachelor of General Studies program, over "a more
traditional kind of thing," because of its flexibility and because it met the
demands of his employer, who wanted him to have a university
degree—"*any* degree, they don't care what." Looking ahead in his career,
he saw the BGS as "the ticket for my job." Peter also expressed his

commitment to the concept of lifelong learning, and felt that distance learning offered, for him, an attractive and workable method of enhancing his existing CMA designation:

> I think there's four courses to go. I foresee just going
> on, and continuing after that, not necessarily with
> Athabasca. You know, learning is a lifetime experience,
> so I would just carry on doing something, I guess.

Peter found that his fulltime job necessitated an alternative delivery style for the completion of *his* degree. Athabasca University's distance delivery format also satisfied him because he didn't like the classroom environment: "I found it a waste of time." Peter deliberately chose a learning experience that he knew would better suit his preference.

Don also needed to work fulltime while he attempted to complete his degree. With some chagrin, he outlined the story of his expulsion from a more traditional university system. His enrolling at Athabasca University was a last attempt to earn a degree.

Similarly, Mary, also working fulltime, was attracted by the convenience of being able to work in her own home at her own pace. Mary was unsure of her career route beyond realizing that she wanted to leave her first career as an elementary school teacher: "I'm not sure that this is the route I need to go to meet my needs, but if it was, I would be extremely motivated because it's so convenient to work in your own home."

Although she felt that she did indeed possess "the skills to be a distance learner," Mary was reassured by the university that help would always be available if she needed it. Donna echoed the same sense of trust in the university's system: "Once I knew that they had certain things in effect and you could utilize them, I became more comfortable."

Brenda chose the distance format at Athabasca University because she was able to fit their courses into a program she was pursuing at another university. Her fulltime job prevented her from enrolling at a traditional university and "Athabasca University was very convenient; their office was right across from my work at the time."

Fran, also a fulltime worker, considered herself very highly motivated:

> Well, I think I can pretty well motivate myself. Usually what happens is that after a while I get tired of doing these courses, and some days after work you just don't feel like it, and I won't do anything for a week, and then I'll realize I'm getting behind and that's enough motivation for me to get going again.

She felt that a high level of motivation had always propelled her learning and had prevented her from ever reaching a state where a "learning hurdle"—a large obstacle in the course of her learning—had to be deliberately overcome.

Fran investigated the possibility of taking night courses from another institution and didn't want to give up "big chunks of [her]

evening." With Athabasca University, she found she was "still free to do my work whenever I want to." For her, that was the "beauty" of distance learning. Fran also found Athabasca University's system more convenient as it allowed her to continue to work fulltime while she pursued a degree. "For me, it worked out better."

Lee was another learner who felt she was very highly motivated and who had chosen distance learning as her personal route to career advancement. She had been told by a traditional university that she needed certain core subjects for her degree, "and that made it a little difficult for a person who works fulltime to take those courses, and that's why I am taking it through Athabasca University."

Lee chose to do her language requirement at Athabasca University because the course was accessible both time-wise and financially. She measured her choice against similar offerings from three other institutions, and decided that Athabasca University's individualized format was ideal for her own personal and work situation.

Donna had also "shopped around" to find an institution that suited her needs. As a fulltime worker who sometimes had to put in overtime, Donna was aware of the time constraints on her schedule. She had tried a "weekend" college arrangement but found that institution's narrow choice of courses confining; after receiving several positive recommendations for Athabasca University from acquaintances, she took the credits she had already accumulated elsewhere, and enrolled at Athabasca University.

Cost had been a consideration for Donna as well. She felt that the weekend college was too expensive, and, although "initially [the decision to change institutions] didn't have a lot to do with money," she eventually considered what she perceived as the weekend college's extra cost as a motivating factor in her move to Athabasca University.

George chose distance learning because it conveniently suited his demanding military career schedule. His personal timetable called for him to take two courses at once, and he found it "a lot easier to take your books and studies with you and not have to worry about attending classes" while fulfilling the travel function of his job. George felt very strongly that his level of self-motivation would sustain him through the rigors of distance study.

Jim was the only one of the study's participants whose distance learning was not career-oriented. He had been an instructor at a technical institute for 25 years and, in retirement, found that "I couldn't stop studying. I can't sit around doing nothing." A long-time interest in computers led him to pursue several computer courses at a distance.

Being able to study while working, and having the convenience and the flexibility of distance-delivered courses, were important factors in decision-making for all but one student.

Expectations

As their motivations varied, so did learners' expectations of their distance learning experiences. The expectations of several of the respondents reflected their level of knowledge of Athabasca University's system. As Mary explained, "I expected to work on my own, and I knew

that I had the support of a tutor if I required one, but it would be mainly just sitting by myself, and reading, obviously, that sort of thing."

John was likewise prepared to, in his words, "go it alone." While confessing to being "inherently lazy" and looking for "the easiest way to do things," he found that he really enjoyed the independence offered by Athabasca University. John indicated a high level of self-confidence, and did not expect to require much help from the institution. "I didn't expect much from the tutors. Because I had been studying for so many years, I figured I could do everything in the book myself, so I wasn't really expecting anything in particular."

Fran knew that there "was going to be a tutor," but also knew that mostly she would be "working on my own." Because she was used to studying on her own, she felt that whatever tutor contact she would have would be sufficient for her.

Peter also perceived himself as a very independent learner and indicated that the concept of support hadn't been important to him when he contemplated undertaking distance studies. He hadn't really thought about it at all.

Nor had Brenda been concerned with the prospect of studying by herself in a distance education course. Although she was aware of the availability of tutor support, she had expected to do the course by herself, at her own pace, "which is frantic at the moment." Her expectation of her learning experience didn't transcend the reality of her situation and her own particular time constraints: "I never considered the aloneness of the situation. I just knew I had to do this correspondence course. It

was the best way for me. I couldn't commit myself to going every Tuesday night or something like that."

Don, with his history of academic failure and feelings of hostility towards administration, had no expectations of Athabasca University at all, nor did he "want anything from them. I just wanted to get my French done." He expected, before starting his course, that his close association with his friends would sustain him through the isolation of distance learning.

Lee drew upon her knowledge of other Athabasca University students who had completed language courses at a distance. She believed from her discussions with them that an adequate support system was in place and that she could therefore benefit from a system that had obviously worked for others. While she realized that "there would be a different amount, a different type, of support needed," she felt that the material she received from the university clearly outlined that type of support and she wasn't "super concerned" about the system, adding that "if the university didn't give me the support, I had support from elsewhere"—from the friends who had already taken French successfully. She felt that "everything would be in place."

Donna, on the other hand, had no idea what to expect because she had never encountered distance learning before. "I didn't know how they had it set up or anything. I was pleasantly surprised that they were quite well organized."

Signing up with Athabasca University

Equally as diverse as their expectations and their reasons for choosing to study at a distance institution were the learners' "starting" experiences with the university. They recalled the experience of accessing information about Athabasca University.

Lee perceived her signing up with Athabasca University to be a very independent experience. She began by contacting Athabasca University "by looking them up in the yellow pages":

> I looked at the calendar, I went into their office in downtown Edmonton and registered. I didn't meet with anyone, interview with anyone, I just went in and filled in an application form and paid my money and got my course.

Lee felt that no counselling would have been necessary for her because she was certain about what she wanted — a French course.

Although Brenda didn't meet with a counsellor either, she knew through Athabasca University's information package that such services were available. She obtained a calendar and read through it, and felt that the university was physically close enough to consult with if she "had any questions." She found, however, that she didn't have any questions—her course, while "very outdated," presented no problems to her.

Peter also read the literature that he received from Athabasca University, and became aware of library services and "probably some

other things. I more or less view it as 'I just get the materials, study them, do the assignments, and that's it.'"

Peter had received his initial information about Athabasca University from a colleague who was a tutor there. When he called the university to inquire about taking courses and receiving credit for courses he had already completed elsewhere, he was sent the required paperwork and thereby began his course.

George, on the other hand, was aware of distance learning from experiences in another province, and had heard about Athabasca University from a friend. He visited Athabasca University's Northern Regional Centre in Edmonton and took home a calendar. After that,

> there was a period of consideration. I looked at what they
> offered, and the time commitment, and restriction on the
> time you can do the programs in, and after looking at that, it
> seemed to be what I was looking for, so I signed up.

George did not receive any counselling, nor did he ask for any, because he felt that the accounting designation he was seeking had a "set curriculum" that defined exactly which courses he needed.

Fran went to Athabasca University to take a specific course to complement a program she was completing by distance from another institution. Her memories of beginning at Athabasca University were vague, and although she wasn't quite sure how she initiated contact, she thought it had been by phone. Her knowledge of the systems

surrounding study at Athabasca University was sparse; she based her assumptions on what was available from another distance institution, but hadn't investigated Athabasca University or inquired first-hand because the need to access those systems "hadn't come up, and I really haven't had to use anything."

Mary, on the other hand, had begun a series of inquiries about university programs by consulting a counsellor at a government counselling agency. When a counsellor suggested she try Athabasca University, she called and made an appointment with their counselling services. The different programs were explained to her and she decided to try "one course to see what it was like" before making the decision to pursue a degree.

Donna also talked to a counsellor at Athabasca University. Her program options were outlined for her, and she was warned about the dangers and difficulties of distance learning. Donna had received a series of study guides to help her adjust to Athabasca University's system, and she had read them all. She felt well informed about her learning and confident in her abilities to handle distance study. Although she was able to describe most of the counselling she had received from Athabasca University, Donna felt that there was some information that she had probably overlooked because she was "just interested in getting into some courses."

Don, having been asked to leave another university, took the advice of friends and went to Athabasca University to take his language credit. "I was determined to get the French so I could get back into

school, and that was that." Athabasca University did not suggest any counselling for him at the time of his registration, nor did he want any:

> Before I decided to take the course there, I said, "I'm going to
> get help from my friends with the French." It's that simple.
> I want to see results. What do *these* people know about me?
> These advisors—what do they know about me? They want
> their money. Do the course and get out.

Don related the course outline and the breakdown of the study guide as he had read it in the material provided him. His knowledge of the material, however, did not lead him to use it as a study support: when asked if he had followed the suggestions in the study guide, he replied, "No."

Administrative problems

The respondents also recounted administrative problems they encountered as distance students in Athabasca University's system.

Brenda, for example, was willing to accept the blame for missing an application deadline, but found that the receptionist "was a little nasty on the phone. I thought that her attitude could have been a little better."

Peter waited nine months for an evaluation of his transcript and was peeved to find that a computer error was to blame for the delay, although he admitted that the process didn't affect his learning or his course selection process. He also indicated some frustration with what he considered to be a discrepancy between the course description and the

actual direction of the course. He wanted to complain about the "misinformation" he received but felt that the appropriate mechanism for such a procedure was at the end of the course, on the evaluation questionnaire, and he hadn't reached that point yet. He drew a careful distinction between the tutor's responsibility for the course and the actual design of the course: "I thought, he doesn't design the course, or the calendar, or whatever."

Donna experienced many problems related to her disability. Because of a disabling tendon condition in her hands, writing essays was very difficult for her, and had caused her to require extensions on her courses. She explained her frustrations:

> I was very concerned that I couldn't write. I had a very high frustration level at that point. I couldn't do what I wanted to. And, you know, it's very hard to keep on with your course when you can't do anything with your hands. So basically I just kept up my reading, but it's frustrating because you can't sit down and actually *do* an essay properly, like you'd like to.

Donna felt that the university had been extremely helpful and patient with her. She had dealt with a number of different people, and found them all to be sympathetic and pleasant.

Don, a learner with experiences uncommon to the others, encountered sets of problems also unique to his learning. Describing his frustrations in dealing with the university's administration, he stated:

It was frustrating on the phone, but it's pretty much consistent

with the secretaries at the university here (University of

Alberta). It really is, when you talk to the secretary, it's pretty

consistent, it's, "I don't know, go talk to someone else."

He was sure that the bureaucratic wrangles were similar regardless of which university it was. His problems with the bureaucracy were lengthy and ongoing: he waited for four months to receive the results of an initial evaluation of a previous transcript, and he was still waiting to receive notification of a date to take an oral examination by telephone. He didn't understand the university's long delay in scheduling his examination.

Being a Distance Learner

In discussing their expectations of their distance learning experience at Athabasca University, the respondents provided large amounts of information about their understanding of themselves as learners. They discussed the ways in which they felt most comfortable learning and factors that sustained them through times of discouragement and hardship. They also volunteered advice to other distance learners.

Questions both directly and indirectly relating to the individual's learning style tended to elicit reflections by each individual upon the

particular way in which he or she learned. There were several

comparisons made between learning in the traditional classroom and

distance learning, or between learning as an adult in a postsecondary

situation and previous learning experiences as a younger, less mature

student.

The data describing respondents' learning styles were categorized

into the following sections: maturity in learning, preferred

environments for learning, reasons for persevering, and advice to other

learners.

Maturity in learning

Brenda described the increased focus on completion, a change in

her learning style attributable, by her, to age:

> In some ways, I guess it's easier. Courses probably become easier
>
> with age and experience, and you can discipline yourself. When
>
> you *have* to do something, you'll give up something and *do* it,
>
> you know your priorities, but years ago, I would have said, the
>
> heck with the course, and done something else.

Peter, too, acknowledged that he was less effective as a learner

when he was younger. Considering himself currently to be fairly goal-

oriented and highly motivated, he described himself 20 years earlier as

not having "a clear picture of what I wanted out of the situation" and

attributed his present vision to "the maturity I've gained. I've had 20

years of work experience and so I know what I want. It's just a clearer

picture." For both these learners, knowing priorities, what they wanted to achieve, helped discipline their efforts.

Lee commented on the nature of returning to studies as a mature learner after years away from formal learning. Since she was from Quebec and had a bilingual background, she felt that her French course would present no problem to her. "I sort of figured it would come back to me in a big rush and it didn't and so I found that a little frustrating." Her initial frustration caused her to become "a little bogged down, but I found that as I started to get into the course more and more, more and more of it was coming back, so actually, the more I progressed, the easier it became."

Preferred environments for learning

Their reflections on their learning styles engaged learners in discussions of how they learned most comfortably, and most often this became a discussion of "place," or environment. For Fran, returning to a traditional classroom situation was worrisome and threatening because she "was more worried that [the other students] would have a lot more knowledge than I did." The opportunity to learn by herself, by distance, was a solace to her because the solitude protected her from an uncomfortable level of interaction with others.

Mary felt a similar type of reclusiveness in her learning. For her, sitting alone with her studies

> was kind of comforting, that was a nice way to get back into it,
> because I didn't have to open my mouth and say anything that

might sound stupid, so it was almost like I was interacting only with paper and words, so it was very safe.

Like Lee, however, she became more comfortable and confident as her studies progressed, "and now I could probably go and sit in a class and feel more confident."

Brenda expressed a simple preference for working alone: "I'd much rather go and do [my work] *by myself* than share it with somebody, not because I thought that mine was going to be better. Sometimes theirs is, but I must like to work by myself."

Similarly, Lee's perceived independence as a learner fostered her belief that "a course is what you put into it yourself." She felt that her opinion about a course was not necessarily someone else's opinion, and that there was no sense or need to contact another learner in the same course. "[Contacting another learner] wouldn't have occurred to me."

Peter acknowledged that "it did make me feel better to *know* that [there was a tutor there to help] before I enrolled. I thought, 'Oh, that's great, if there's a problem, I can call someone.'" He pointed out that he did, however, resolve his problems himself. "I sit down and go through it; that's just the type of person I am." Far from feeling a sense of . isolation in his distance studies, he enjoyed the ability to work on his own, and had done "quite well" on his courses. Peter also admitted that the didn't really want to talk to his tutor. In fact, he felt his tutor had intruded into his work schedule by instituting a telephone quiz which

Peter, as learner, didn't feel was a necessary or viable teaching strategy at the time.

George, confident, organized, already had an undergraduate degree from a military college. He credited his earlier experience with developing in him "leadership abilities, self-discipline, being able to take a group of people and accomplish a certain task." Recently, however, he had begun to question his belief in the military values that had been such a large part of his life to this point:

> I've sort of rebelled against it now. It's so stringent, I feel, the autocratic sense: you'll do this, no questions, that comes out; you can take a task and accomplish it without blinking an eye because of the institution.

When asked, however, what made him feel good about his learning, George replied without hesitation: accomplishment. He pointed to the use of exams as measures of achievement that gave students a sense of their own competence and proficiency in an area of study.

George was aware of how his weaknesses as a learner had contributed to his having had to apply for extensions on several of his courses. While pointing to travel demands on his time, he explained the difficulties of self-directed learning:

You intentionally take your studies [with you] to work on them [thinking], if you do, you have to have time. By the time you get there, you find out you don't have time. They get put aside, and then another couple of weeks down the road you're away again.

George was also aware of his own need to be in charge of his learning and his strength in organizing and planning. He outlined the importance of his ability to know "what's important and what's not important, being able to organize myself in terms of where I study and how to study."

Nonetheless, George preferred to study in a group. He felt that a large difference between the more traditional learning that he had done in the past and his current distance learning was the level of security he experienced while studying:

Levels of security—it's probably more secure in a structured classroom setting, and I think that just goes with the flow, because everybody's there just doing the same thing. You're in a group, you're not alone, and you also have someone who can answer questions at any time.

The issue of security in the classroom was a major one for Don, too. Don described his reaction to traditional classroom experiences, by

relating an incident that illustrated how "inferior" he felt in the classroom while sitting next to another student who "was having an easy time of it." He felt that his instructor didn't realize his uneasiness in the class. "She didn't seem to be approachable at all, so I was turned off." Don's comfort level was described by him as being

> the most important thing. That's why I wanted to feel an interaction with [my instructors]. Then I could enjoy [the class], whereas if I feel frustrated and they're unapproachable, then I can't enjoy it.

Don also indicated that he felt embarrassment at his lack of prowess in French, and specifically avoided speaking the language in front of his French-speaking friends because "they were advanced and they'd laugh, so you'd feel bad." In contrast, the interaction he had established with his tutor had allowed him to be comfortable with learning. He was happy that he had established a workable relationship with his tutor: "Now that I'm with somebody comfortable, I'm actually enjoying [the course]."

For these learners, their concerns about returning to traditional classroom instruction proved to be another incentive for studying by themselves. Both George and Don sought interaction with others in learning as their preferred mode.

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Reasons for persevering

The respondents were asked what in particular kept them determined to persevere through their times of difficulty. Most indicated a pressing personal need to complete their course in order to satisfy the demands they had placed on themselves:

Lee: "I have to get this course: I *have* to get the credit."

George: "Personal motivation, the need for the course."

Donna: "I want to finish. I want to get my degree."

Mary: "I was just determined to get this thing done."

Peter, on the other hand, felt that he hadn't encountered a degree of difficulty that threatened his finishing; John, the retired instructor, was very relaxed about the fact that he had needed an extension for his course, and indicated that he really didn't care about the outcome of his course, or his transcript.

Advice to other learners

When asked, most of the respondents were willing to forward advice related to their distance learning. Don felt that it was important to determine a network of support before you attempted distance learning. Peter and John both indicated that a high degree of self-motivation was necessary in order to successfully undertake distance learning; John pointed out the differences between classroom participation and distance learning:

Most students will slack off. Most of them have a teacher or professor to motivate them one way or another, to shame

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them or anger them. Distance learners don't have that. A tutor doesn't take the place of an instructor. They don't bawl you out, throw a book at you, get you going, get you mad.

George, Fran, Brenda and Donna all reiterated the value of using the distance system set up by the university. Brenda urged potential students, if they needed help, "to contact [the tutors]. There are people there. [The university] seems to have support staff available, people who can guide them if there's difficulty." Donna had found the university to be most helpful to her and echoed Brenda's advice to make contact with them for any help needed. George concluded emphatically, "Use them. Use [the support services] to the capacity that they're required."

Obtaining Support

The last three research questions of this study focus on students' knowledge and use of support services. Respondents replied specifically to questions about their understanding of the availability of student support services and to report on their use of those services. The data were categorized into the following sections: contact with support services, learner-tutor relationships, and tutor problems.

Contact with support services

John's reaction to Athabasca University's range of support services was nonchalant; although he was aware of what the institution offered,

he "never paid too much attention." He always "meant" to go to an information session at a location close to his home but didn't. He had noticed "signs all over the place" advertising this service, but his failure to attend "was my own fault in a lot of ways in that I was being very independent." John didn't feel that he needed to consult Athabasca University at any time for additional information on accessing support services because his learning was "a hobby-fun thing and I didn't push myself too much." Whereas he pointed out Athabasca University's failure to "offer" him student support, he was quick to accept responsibility for not needing or wanting additional support and pointed out that more serious, motivated learners could probably benefit from a system of student support.

John also classified himself as an "abnormal" Athabasca University learner because of his 25 years of experience as an instructor. He felt that he "could do it just as well as they could," but added, "just because a person knows it all doesn't mean he's going to do it all."

Brenda drew distinctions between her own situation, her proximity to an Athabasca University office, and the fates of other learners much more removed by distance from the university. She pointed out that she also had access to other sources of support for her course: "I had some other stuff [at home]." Contrasting her opportunities for support with those of a friend in Fort McMurray who was taking the same course, Brenda pointed out that she had "any number of places" to go to access resource materials.

Brenda felt that the support she could access, if necessary, was "great" because of her physical proximity to Athabasca University. She had not needed to use any of Athabasca University's support services in her current course—"I'm just doing my course at my own pace"— but thought that perhaps she would need to in future courses.

While discussing her friend in isolated Fort McMurray, Brenda pointed out that the telephone made support more possible. Likewise, although he identified the telephone as "a very useful tool," George, too, had made minimal use of Athabasca University's support systems. George praised the organization and the presentation of their explanatory materials:

> The package itself was there, you fill it out, it tells you what
> you have to do, what you have to send in, where to send it,
> you drop it off, you do it. The calendar was very specific.
> The information brochures were very well put together. I
> really didn't feel I had any questions I had to ask about.

George had read his materials package thoroughly, and felt cognizant of Athabasca University's support mechanism. He was aware of Athabasca University's library but admitted to not having used it. Some of the books he had purchased for previous courses had been a help to him. He also thought that, as a matter of convenience, he would have tried the local library first to explore their holdings, and would perhaps have tried to access the University of Alberta library if necessary.

George's discussion of library access led him again to evaluate the organization of Athabasca University's support materials. He thought that the correlation of textbooks to written materials was so strong and so well explained that there was no need of further resources. He thought he had used the university's support systems to the degree that he needed them.

Similarly, Peter expressed satisfaction with his course materials, finding that "the text and course notes all tied in very well"; he admitted, therefore, that he had never used Athabasca University's library. He, too, had reverted to some old textbooks for additional information. While he felt that Athabasca University provided adequate support services for its students, and also felt that he had been made well aware of their existence and availability, he commented that the only support he had accessed was his tutor's telephone quiz system—a "forced support [that was] more to get a mark than for your knowledge." When asked how his use of support services had affected his learning experience, Peter admitted with laughter that "it hasn't."

Lee, studying a language at Athabasca University, also felt that "the course materials themselves were enough support material." When adding up the time she spent on her studies, she concluded that access to any *more* support materials would have resulted in the expenditure of too much time on her course.

> Quite obviously, I wouldn't have wanted any more support
> materials, because you take a half an hour videotape, and a

half an hour audiotape, plus a couple of hours going

through the chapter yourself, and that's only supposed to be

half a week. So if they had come along and said, there's

more audiotapes available, you know, I don't have *time* for

this.

Upon reflection, Lee classified the videotapes and audiotapes as

support, since she had requested them from Athabasca University as

supplementary. They hadn't cost her any extra money, and "I was

impressed with the service from the library. I phoned them collect, and,

'No problem, we'll get it out to you,' and within three days, I had the

stuff." All the information that was necessary to access these support

materials had been clearly outlined in her information package.

When asked to rate and comment on the level of awareness that

she had had about Athabasca University's support services, Lee indicated

that the available support services were "certainly adequate for the course

and level of the course." Although she had known about Athabasca

University's library, she felt that her particular course didn't warrant use

of *the* library facilities and she was confident that she had accessed the

necessary amount of support for her learning. She had received

information about the library from the university's information package.

She concluded: "I think if I'd run into *real* problems, I would have

discussed it with the tutor. I don't think anything really came up."

Fran had used the local library to access materials on English

poetry when she "was having major problems understanding some of

it." On the advice of her English tutor, she had also ordered a video on one of the curriculum plays. Fran didn't remember if she had read in the information package that videos were available for viewing. She hadn't drawn on any other sources of support on during her English course.

Neither could Mary remember where she discovered that Athabasca University offered a study skills course, although she thought i   probably in their calendar or in one of the numerous pamphlets she had read while investigating Athabasca University during the summer months when, as a teacher, she had had the time to do so.

Like Lee, Mary felt that her use of support services was governed by the level of difficulty of the course she was taking. "If I had taken, say, an economics course, I probably would have called the tutor a lot more."

Since her course hadn't required her to access secondary sources, Mary hadn't used the library, although she knew it existed. She had, however, watched ACCESS TV to supplement her learning, commenting that it was "really strange" to learn from a TV show as a part of a course. Mary's use of the TV as a learning device was linked to her possession of a VCR so that she could tape the shows for convenient viewing. Mary likened the experience of "the talking head" to being "no different than sitting in a lecture theatre at the University of Alberta listening to someone regurgitate information." Overall, however, she endorsed the level of support services available from Athabasca University.

Don was appreciative of the level of support he received from his French tutor. He compared the support and the subsequent "comfort" he felt to his experiences in a larger, traditional university setting where the

instructor "didn't have time to say, 'I understand where you're coming from.'"

Don had relied very heavily on his friends for support while he took his French course. One friend "made me watch Channel 3 on cable. We listen and try to retain and I'm good at copying dialects." Don attributed his good marks in the oral component of his French to his use of television.

Although he was aware of the library services offered by Athabasca University, Don had not used those services and in fact had never considered using them:

> What are you going to get out of a book? The only way to
> understand French and to get into it [is to] hear it, so, I used
> the cassette a lot. You can read out of a book, a sentence, but
> you don't know where the stresses are, or how smooth it's
> said, and you can hear it on the cassette and also in the
> music.

Don had also qualified the amount of help that Athabasca University's counselling service could have offered him. Referring to the fact that his academic career at another institution was in a shambles, and aware of the fact that his avenues of approach were very limited, he reflected: "What *could* they do? They couldn't do anything. What were they going to tell me? The university here said, 'Do your French or don't come back.'"

Don's success in his French course was crucial to the success of his future university endeavours. Realizing this, he explained his reliance on his friends for help and support in his French course:

> I always turned to friends. When it came to something I
> didn't understand in the book, I phoned a friend and said,
> "Look, I'm going through the exercises and what do I do?"
> They knew my situation, that I had to take French, and they
> thought, let's give him a hand because he wants to get back
> in, to get his life back on track.

Although Don had many friends that he talked to about his studies, he never talked to his family about his university progress, explaining: "I don't talk to my family about it, no. 'How's the French going?' 'Good.' That's it."

Similarly, about his tutor he admitted: "I wouldn't phone her. It's easier talking to a friend." When pressed about his relationship with his tutor, he differentiated between "knowing" her—"I didn't feel I knew her"—and feeling comfortable with her—"I felt comfortable with her."

Don felt that he had used Athabasca University's support services as much as he needed to for his purposes. "I only needed to get the answers; that was it." He felt, however, a need for the support network that was provided him by his friends, and contrasted at length his learning situations at a traditional institution to his learning at a distance.

[In a traditional learning environment] I was never really

comfortable. I went into a lot of classes not interacting with

anybody, [feeling], "I'm here alone." If I had got into the

"hype" of learning, I would have done better, but for some

reason, I had this untouchable attitude. When I was at

Athabasca University, I knew that I was limited but I

surrounded myself with a support group of my friends that

really knew French, so that I could go to them. I wasn't

going to rely on them to cheat, you know, screw the system,

but when I got stuck, they were the first ones I called.

Don indicated that although Athabasca University had a form to fill out

if learners wanted to contact other distance learners, he still wouldn't

have done that. He likened that type of learner-contact to his learning in

a traditional university classroom where "I looked at this guy and he was

getting nines, and I felt inferior, and I didn't really want that." He felt

protected by the isolation of his learning experience.

Several of the respondents surmised that the level of support

needed by learners would vary according to the individual learner. Peter

suggested that "depending on the person, a lot of people wouldn't do

well if they didn't have the contact [with the institution]." John felt that

since "very few people know how to study," a tutor's guiding hand

would be more necessary for some learners than for others. He spoke in

favor of a learner-support system, where "we could have learned from

[more advanced learners] if they were ahead of you, and they could be reinforced by reaching back in the course to help you."

Donna had done part-time postsecondary studies at several institutions and had found that learning with a group was a source of support for her. Although she had missed the support of a group of learning peers, she accessed both her family and "a really good friend at work" for encouragement.

Donna had also utilized several of Athabasca University's support systems during her association with the university. While careful to assert her independence and control over her learning—"I picked [my courses] out myself and I want to take something that I'm going to feel comfortable with"— she described the process of counselling that she had experienced, recalling that she had found the counsellors "really open about talking with you about how you want to do things, or what you think about them."

Donna had read Athabasca University's literature extensively and was aware of its library services and study skills information. She praised Athabasca University for its library availability and service, but hadn't "really utilized any of their library facilities yet because I use the library downtown and I find that sufficient for my needs. I believe that as I progress, however, I'll have to find out what kind of [other] services they offer." Because she was still registered with another postsecondary institution, Donna felt that she could also access that library if necessary.

Because of her disability, Donna had been designated a special needs student by Athabasca University and had "had a lot of contact in

that direction." She was pleased that Athabasca University had been "so good about it." To date, Donna felt that she had used each service in the way and to the extent that she needed to.

While learners appraised the level of interaction that they had found necessary for satisfactory completion of their courses, their "satisfactory" completion wasn't always a reflection of their optimum level of achievement.

John readily acknowledged that his retirement learning was a "fun thing" for him. He knew that his performance could have been better had he applied himself more diligently to his studies. George also admitted that his final grade would be lower than what he thought he could achieve. Professional commitments and a heavy travel schedule contributed to George's requiring extensions on both his distance courses.

The status of Don's completion, also, was questionable at the time of his interview. Regardless of their completion status, learners uniformly thought that they had accessed the support services necessary for their particular learning style, and that they had successfully utilized those services to the degree they desired, given their motivation level and personal reasons for taking the course.

Learner-tutor relationships

The support service most often named by the respondents as most important to their learning was the tutor. Respondents spoke at length about their tutor relationships.

Peter's relationships with the tutors in his courses were very minimal. "In one of the courses, the tutor never did call, but I didn't pay

very much attention to it, you know, it didn't bug me one way or the other." In this particular case, Peter had no interaction with his tutor except through the required assignments. When asked what the tutor could have done to avoid this situation, Peter suggested that perhaps a phone call

> a couple of weeks after the course officially starts would
> break ice, more than anything. I guess I kind of related it to
> salesmanship, or something, if he was to call and say, "Hi,
> I'm your tutor, please call me whenever you want." I realize
> that's a lot to ask of a tutor.

Peter was quite surprised to find that may tutors *did* initiate a routine kind of contact in that way. However, he reflected: "I'm not saying that if that were done, I'd necessarily contact that tutor any more than I've done in these two cases but I think if a real problem *did* arise, I'd be more prone to call that tutor." Peter's limited contact with the tutor that he did call was necessitated by his need to "find out what was going to be on the exam, what kind of questions. That was basically it."

In spite of the non-use of his tutors, Peter had checked out their qualifications in the university calendar, and thought it would be a good idea to include an outline of their experience there also.

Donna detailed a much more extensive tutor relationship than did Peter; in fact, she mused that it would be nice to meet "these people" after having spent so much time with them.

Because of the tendon disability which prevented her from writing quickly, or sometimes, at all, Donna's tutor initiated a fairly regular contact with her to check on her progress. A second tutor indicated to Donna that she would "check in" periodically if she hadn't heard from her, but the tutor in fact had never had to do that, as Donna maintained a steady contact with her. However, she explained that it made her feel good because

[the reinforcement] definitely gives you encouragement. It shows you that they're genuine in their contact with you. It gives you more of a real perspective on your whole course and I would say that that's probably something that there *should* be. There should be that kind of contact.

Donna felt that the tutor system had worked very well for her. Although sometimes she had not been able to access her tutor when she felt she needed to, for "a little bit of confirmation" on something, the delay in conferring with her tutor "wasn't detrimental to what I was learning. I found that although I thought I was having difficulty with [some concepts], I had the basics, and all I needed was just that discussion, to expand it."

Donna indicated that if she had really needed help at a given moment and hadn't been able to contact her tutor, she would have called the university's tutorial services. "In fact, I believe [Athabasca University] makes that quite clear: if you have a difficulty with a tutor,

contact them, and I would." Donna wasn't exactly sure what tutorial services would have done in such a case, or in a case she hypothesized where tutor and learner "weren't communicating properly," but she felt her payment for this learning experience justified such a concern: "I'm paying for my education, and I feel that we should have quality people teaching us, and if they can't do it, then I guess maybe we should say something about it, as students."

Fran had had experience with two tutors and contrasted their approaches to her learning. Although she felt she hadn't required a great deal of interaction with her tutors, Fran had maintained a regular schedule of contact with them, talking to one of her tutors "every two weeks, once every three weeks, depending where I was in the course and how much I had to do."

Fran's other tutor was described by her as being more talkative, more outgoing. "I found if I was talking about what I'd been reading, she volunteered a lot of information, more so than the tutor I have now." However, Fran classified both tutor relationships as "business-like," and didn't distinguish any preferential feelings between them. "I think I feel about the same. I don't feel uncomfortable calling either one."

In her English course, admittedly not her favorite or best subject, Fran had encountered problems with the required poetry. "The number of poems they wanted you to learn was incredible, and I was having trouble with that too because I didn't know how to study." In this case, Fran found her tutor very supportive when she agreed that perhaps the workload *was* too heavy. After discussing the course and her problems

with her tutor, Fran settled on a learning compromise. "I gave up on the stuff I didn't understand, and I stuck with the stuff that I understood, and I did okay."

In comparing her contact with each of her two tutors, Fran considered her own level of interest in the particular course, and the level of difficulty she had experienced with the material. Because she did not like her English course, she felt that the contact she had required with her tutor was "enough, because the interest wasn't there." In her other course, a psychology course, she found that "the study guides they send with the textbook are very good. They really explain a lot." Fran found the material straightforward and well explained and therefore "just phoned the tut: to do my quizzes."

John described the tutor's weekly telephone hours as the "hour window once a week when you could get at him." When trying to contact his tutor, he often wondered "how many other guys are trying to get through while the line is busy all the time." The restricted availability of his tutor, however, kept John committed to trying to reach him on the telephone, and he judged that he hadn't had to wait "too long, perhaps only 20 minutes."

Realizing that "he's your confessor, you've got to learn to put your trust in him," John felt that a more personal contact with his tutor, perhaps through a longer and more personal letter or an attached picture of the tutor, would have helped him "to get to know this person."

The timing of calls to tutors was an issue for several of the respondents. Donna maintained a high level of contact with her

Humanities tutor because there was a self-test at the end of every lesson that necessitated a phone call to her tutor. It was important for her to able to make contact when she required it.

The level of difficulty she experienced with her English course required Donna to call her English tutor fairly frequently also. At one point in her courses, both Donna's tutors had their calling hours on the same evening. Donna surmised that such an arrangement might cause problems "down the road" but had worked out a schedule that accommodated their overlapping hours of access: "I would phone [one tutor] right away because he was earlier than she was by an hour. So I would contact him first and we would do our discussion and everything and then I would contact her after."

Donna also suggested that the limited time available to contact the tutors might be a problem for some people, because "it's only once a week, only for three hours. And a lot of times, you can't get to them when you want." Donna hadn't found this to be a problem, but admitted, when asked, that she had spoken to "somebody else" about problem areas when she was unable to contact her tutor.

One of Brenda's tutors was very accessible—"he has all these different hours"—but she hadn't chosen to call either one of her tutors. . She mused that if she were having difficulty with a course, she would probably have appreciated her tutor calling her to check on her progress, but, other than that, "I wouldn't want them to be pushing themselves on me. I just don't like that. I like correspondence because I can do it when I want." Although she hadn't used the support of her tutors, she

recognized that "the support was there for me if I needed it" and was especially appreciative of one tutor's use of memos to keep in touch and to let his students know if he was going to be away for several days.

Brenda just hadn't felt the need to access her tutors:

> I think if I go through what I have to go through, that's it. I guess I just haven't had a question on either one of these courses. I sometimes feel that I *should* be accessing the fellow because he *is* readily available.

Mary had "made some observations" about her tutor in their initial telephone contact. She found him not unfriendly, "just not outgoing—not the type to strike up a conversation." Laughingly, she admitted that perhaps if he had been more talkative—"more like me"—she might have called him more "because I like to talk. But he knew his stuff. He was just fine. Matter-of-fact."

George had stronger feelings about one of his tutors, admitting that the personality factor in one of his tutor-relationships had been a difficult one for him. Describing personality as "a partial issue" that contributed to a sense of discord in one of his courses, and recognizing that while "she wasn't a bubbly personality, you don't expect that with all your tutors," George, nonetheless, had experienced a sense of frustration with his female tutor that seemed to him to result from her particular approach to the material he was studying.

You never felt like getting into conversations with her because you would start to get talking about a concept with her and then she would turn around and start asking you direct questions about it, not questions in conversation, but theoretical questions. I felt I would have liked her to enlighten me on things I found a little vague in the book and try to relate it to other situations, but I felt limited in that she seemed to be tending to carry on, on certain aspects of theory.

George analysed his relationship with his female tutor as he compared that situation to his other, more comfortable relationship with his male tutor. "I felt at ease to call him where towards the latter part of the other course, I almost tried to *avoid* her phone calls. You know, you shouldn't have to do this." George accepted some of the blame for the perpetuation of this untenable situation: "I guess I should have taken [some] action because it was my responsibility because I'm paying for the course and I'm paying for her services."

Attempting to understand the nature of his tutor's telephone approach, George reflected:

It wasn't formalized, but it was persistent, and I think it was more to make sure you understood the material. I wouldn't say every time she called there was the same type of format. I would tend to say it's just her nature.

Although George had found her process very undesirable, he summed up his learning experience with her in this way: "I took what I wanted out of her."

Don began a lengthy saga of his relationship with his tutor with, "She was really nice." His French course required him to pre̖ ɹre for an oral quiz at the end of every lesson, and he had a three-hour period every Tuesday night where he was able to call her for his chapter quiz. Laughing, Don recalled the times when he had called the tutor from the garbage dump, on breaks from his work as a garbage collector.

Don hesitated to make contact with his tutor because he had "a basic fear of the oral [part of the course], and of talking to a person who *knou₋* French, because you're afraid of making a mistake." That he som ҂imes worked the afternoon shift, making a Tuesday night call to her (' fficult, exacerbated his reluctance to make contact. When he finally called ι er,

> it went okay the first time, and then after I phoned her a
> couple of times, she gets to know you. She got to
> understand. She said flat out, "I understand it's hard to do
> it over the phone."

Don's confidence increased gradually over the length of his course: where at first he had written out his answers so he could present them verbally, he eventually only "wrote some words here and there but not

whole sentences. By the end of the oral exercise, I didn't have to write anything down."

Don described the anxiety he felt when required to contact his tutor. He thought

> she was phoning to say, "Where are you? What are you
> doing? You have got to get this done. You have to fit into
> the program" kind-of-thing, and I thought that's what it
> would be because I hadn't phoned her before. She'd be
> reprimanding me because I wasn't sticking to the program
> the way they had laid it out, but it wasn't [like that]. She just
> phoned and said, "I understand." It was really nice. It's
> tough talking to somebody over the phone when you don't
> know what she looks like.

Don established a distinction between the "course" support he received—help with the actual French content of the course—and the "emotional" support from his tutor. For Don, the sense of comfort he felt developing with his tutor was the most important aspect of that relationship. "She just corrects me and then we both laugh when I make a mistake. So I think because I'm comfortable with her already it's not a problem. The support from the French part hasn't been that strong."

In fact, Don felt so comfortable in his relationship with his tutor that he requested her for the second part of his French course. "I said, I

don't want to have to reintroduce myself to someone different, and they said, 'Okay, we'll see if she's available,' and she was."

It occurred to me, in conversation with Don, that he had felt a level of social attraction to his French tutor. In response to a question on that topic, he volunteered this information:

She used to live in Hawaii, so I talked to her about that before I went to Hawaii. We got to know each other on that level over the phone, and then I thought, I wrote once on the lessons, this is crazy, I'm going to send you a picture of myself because I can't stand talking to someone I can't see. Since you talk, you kind of get attracted to her, because she's basically there to help you, and if you don't feel that type of compassionate relationship right off, your fear [of her being harsh and critical] grows, but once your fear goes away, it's kind of like you *do* know this person.

Don was candid, when asked further, about his motivation for establishing as much of a relationship as possible with his French tutor.

Yeah, at first I thought I could put one over on her, or sweet talk her, and say, "Oh, I'm dumb in French," so she'd feel bad and give me and extra mark here and there, you know. You always think that. But then, no, I'm comfortable here, and she's nice, and she understands where I'm coming

from, that it's hard for an adult, for somebody who's never

taken French before.

Don felt that his tutor had maintained a professional relationship
with him, and had responded appropriately to his written work,
successfully pacing his learning. "Even on the phone, it was kind of like,
'That's it, go on to the next work.'"

Don also recognized the functional relationship that underlay
their tutor-learner interaction. When he had a series of administrative
problems with the university office, he did not at any point speak with
his tutor about those frustrations, pointing out: "That's not her
business." Similarly, when pressed about the social-personal nature of
his relationship with the tutor, he replied: "She's nice and the whole bit,
but once I've done this French course, I'm out of there. I don't care."

Lee had also been very satisfied with her tutor generally. "I have
no complaints. She was good, and she always sent back the assignment
with a nice little note on it. She was very friendly and very open."

Lee classified the amount of her interaction with her tutor as "not
a whole lot." Her contact with the tutor was precipitated by the need to
complete four oral assignments for her course,

and I contacted her when they were due, and I suppose she

phoned me a couple of times to see how I was doing, but my

need to call her, other than that—I think it was just one

occasion when I had a question about a question that was poorly worded. That's about the only time I contacted her.

Tutor problems

Many of the learners reported difficulties in their tutor relationships. George was especially frustrated with the approach of one of his tutors, and found that he wasn't receptive to her telephone style. His course required that he complete assignments and telephone his tutor with the responses. Being telephone-dependent on his tutor created for him a type of discomfort that he didn't think would exist if he hadn't been required to communicate with her on the telephone.

John, having spent so many years as an instructor, expressed some concerns about the methodology of one of his tutors but acknowledged that "each instructor is a person, is different. You accept what you get and work with it." John got off to a "kind of a bad start" with his tutor due to an error in the tutor's introductory letter to him.

> They told me the hours were from 6:30 to 10:30 p.m.
> Mondays, and I called the first time at quarter to seven, and
> I got some lady in the house and she was quite cold and
> crisp and didn't like the phone call, and I left my number
> and [the tutor] called me back about ten o'clock, and he was
> courteous enough, but he made it clear that it was an error
> and I wasn't to phone before seven.

John could understand both sides of the timing dilemma. Although he rationalized that the tutor, for his part, couldn't "be married to the student, answering the phone 24 hours a day," he admitted that it was difficult to move ahead in a course when "you're working on it Tuesday night, and you have to save [your questions] till next Monday." Several times, when this had happened to him, all he needed was "one or two words to put me back on the right track." Instead, he spent "the whole week going off in one direction when I should have been going the other way."

His frustrations over the lack of access to one of his tutors was a concern echoed at some length by Lee. While facing the imminent end of her learning contract with the university, Lee found that her tutor had been called away on a family emergency, and was unable to contact her. As she recalled,

I was getting a little irritated, to be honest, because I had another commitment on a Tuesday night and for two months I cancelled that commitment, and then to sit home and dial the phone every ten minutes and get a busy signal, I found that a little exasperating.

She concluded, however, that the problem "wasn't really *her*, just sort of a breakdown in the system," and, "in fairness to [the tutor]," as explanation for the difficulty in getting through to her on the telephone, "she seemed to think she had a couple of students who were in great

need of support and [they] therefore took up a lot of her allotted time for the rest of her students." Lee acknowledged, though, that "during that period when [the tutor] was away, although I didn't *need* the support with respect to the course, I was starting to panic that I wasn't going to get the course finished in time." Basing her judgment on the outcome of her many contacts with the university over this and other procedural problems, Lee concluded that Athabasca University seemed to "be bending over backwards to service their students and to make it not at all inconvenient, the fact that they are a hundred and some odd miles away."

Mary had only phoned her tutor twice during her course, both times to inquire about her impending exams. Whereas she had no trouble reaching him the first time, to ask about her midterm exam, she was unable to reach him the second time until after the allocated hours had passed, and then

> he wouldn't answer the phone. I thought, "Oh, what will I do now?" As it turned out, I think [contact] took about one week, and I was almost going to cancel my exam because I wasn't sure what to study.

Finally, after a week of anxiety for Mary, a university worker had contacted her to answer her questions about the exam. She described the incident as "the only thing that I wasn't really pleased about."

It had never occurred to Mary to phone her tutor about her ideas or reflections on her coursework: "I never did because I didn't view that as his role, to discuss material with me unless I didn't fully understand it. If I hadn't fully understood something, I would have called him."

Emerging Themes

The preceding chapter has displayed the data by grouping respondents' disclosures of their distance learning experiences into three categories that encompassed the breadth of their revelations. Although each respondent di . . . . . sarily share an experience in each of the areas that became a category, the experiences of each were reflected in several broad themes which emerged as commonalities from their stories. These themes can be described as: learners' accepting responsibility for learning, learners' controlling their learning, and learners' being detached from their learning. A discussion of each of these three themes follows.

Learners' accepting responsibility for learning

As the respondents recounted stories of their use of Athabasca University's support services for their distance learning experiences, they acknowledged in each case that they, as learners, were fully responsible for each event in their learning process.

To begin with, most learners had come to the institution with a firm commitment to an educational goal. In some cases, these educational goals were tied to another program in which they were

already enrolled; in others, goals were job-related and were associated with the desire for advancement or career change. The impetus of this type of motivation gave learners a decisive sense of ownership of their learning.

Learners' sense of ownership of their learning was manifested in part by their ability to identify those aspects of their learning experiences that had been the most positive, or that had best facilitated their learning. For example, several identified the physical presence of either an instructor or peers as meaningful factors in their own personal learning histories; because both those presences were absent in distance education, changes in their learning styles had been necessary. Still, while reflecting on the nature of their consequent performance, learners assumed responsibility for having made, or for *not* having made, those adjustments.

Respondents also affirmed their responsibility for their learning situations in times of crisis or when problems arose. Learners who had failed to complete coursework within the given period of time accepted that they had been lax in their work habits or that they had undertaken too much work or that they had mismanaged what time they had. Learners who had encountered frustrations in their tutor relationships accepted the limitations of the telephone system and their restricted access to their tutors' time.

While learners based their evaluations of the quality of Athabasca University's available support services on the ease with which the support services were incorporated into learners' study plans, they

acknowledged that they used only whatever parts of Athabasca University's support services that they thought they needed.

Donna, for example, was aware of Athabasca University's library services, but used the local library to get the required information because it was handier for her. Lee made a conscious decision not to view videotap , related to her course because that viewing time, in addition to time al   t on audiotapes and chapter readings, became more of a time com .... ent than she was willing to make. In these cases where learners had consciously made decisions that limited their use of the university's available support services, lea..ers acce   responsibility for their level of diligence in their cou .

Learners also all assumed responsibility for the amount of interaction they had experienced with their tutors, although they acknowledged that certain tutors had been successful in varying degrees with their respective learners. Most learners recognized that their levels of interaction with their tutors were the result of their own decisions, decisions that were based on their perceptions of their own learning eds.

Learners evaluated their tutors on the basis of their personalities, their approaches to their tutoring roles, and the techniques that they used in order to fulfill those functions. Although learners demonstrated a high level of cognizance of their tutors' personalities—perceived strengths, weaknesses, kindnesses, failures—they indicated that their levels of interaction were not affected by their responses to those personality traits.

Learners' controlling their learning

A thematic corollary to the concept of learners' acceptance of responsibility for their learning was the notion of learners' demand for absolute control of their learning. Learners approached Athabasca University having made their own decisions as to what particular course or route they needed for their educational future and they expected to continue exercising control over their educational decisions. As a result, they either sought no counselling advice from the institution, or they passed through the counselling function simply for affirmation of their decisions.

Whereas learners consulted the university's materials and familiarized themselves with their course materials and requirements, they imposed their own sense of control over learning decisions. Peter, for example, did not want his tutor to intrude on his learning process with her telephone quizzes; Don had looked over the course guide that came with his course materials, but did not adapt his study schedule to meet the course guide's suggested timelines.

As learners' initial decisions to attend Athabasca University were grounded in factors of convenience and practicality, so also they expected that their progress through their courses would reflect their high levels of autonomy in, and control of, that learning.

In some cases, learners' demand for control had outcomes which, although unintended, were understood by them to be consequences of their decision-making. The issue of course completion is a good example, as learners discussed their ultimate success in their courses in

terms of their course completions. In relating this information, some learners indicated that they had not completed their courses to their satisfaction: some were still completing overdue courses on extensions; some had completed with less-than-satisfactory grades. Others were in the process of completing courses with a rueful sense of chagrin at eventually receiving what they anticipated to be a grade below their initial expectations or perceived capability. These less-than-satisfactory grades were accepted as inevitable results of learners' decisions to limit their commitment to a course.

Learners' evaluation of their learning successes reflected the determination with which they had approached their courses. Those who required a certain course for completion of a work-related credential, or for another program, accepted matter-of-factly that they might have performed more sharply if their motivation had been more personal and less directed by career need or job function. Each respondent built into his or her appraisal of performance a "effort-to-reward ratio" which directly reflected his or her life/work situation at the moment.

Learners' being detached from learning

The theme of detachment emerged very strongly from the findings of the study. There was a sense of learners' disengagement from their learning; thus removed from an emotional closeness to their material, learners seemed to be able to very calculatingly and objectively reflect on their learning, on their learning styles, and on their relationship as learners to the institution. All learners were able to

reflect extensively on their learning experiences with Athabasca University, and they indicated a sense of pleasure at being able to articulate those reflections on their learning styles and their learning successes. Descriptions of the learning that took place, however, were generally functional and unimpassioned.

Each learner had, to some degree—having chosen the distance education format—reflected on the process of distance learning. Although learners were motivated by differing combinations of factors, they all, nonetheless, had selected their Athabasca University learning experiences in calculated fashion to satisfy their particular felt needs. Behind each choice of course was a strategic design intended to benefit the learner in a pragmatic way—a way most often oriented to a career path. Athabasca University courses fed into the respondents' larger learning patterns, each course fulfilling a defined role. Learners, therefore, tended not to seek counsel or advice from the Athabasca University staff, but merely to use their support to implement their pre-determined plans.

Learners' evaluations of support services were similarly functional. Learners addressed the human factor in their use of support services, as stories of personality issues with Athabasca University staff and tutors were plentiful, but neither positive nor negative experiences had impacted greatly upon the respondents' learning. In a tolerant, polite, accommodating and ultimately dispassionate manner, learners dealt thankfully with pleasant staff, and endured less pleasant encounters stoically.

Materials were appreciated for being clear and u complicated; study guides and texts were praised for being straightforward and relevant; the administrative steps in the learning process were evaluated for their contribution to the overall business of attaining the course credit.

A part of the business-like demeanor with which learners approached their studies was reflected in the sense of privacy that surrounded their involvement with Athabasca University. Although everyone had relied on some degree of external support from friends or family, most of the respondents accepted the challenges of their lessons as a part of their personal business. Several spoke outrightly of their preference to confront their material in the privacy of their homes; others, for various reasons, had either refused the chance to contact other learners or mused that although perhaps it would be a good idea for *other* learners, they would personally choose not to become involved in any sort of learner network.

A correlating twist to this theme emphasizes the sense of separation that learners felt from what they perceived as the "norm" in distance learning. It became obvious through the comments of several of the respondents that they did not *identify* with the "average" distance learner: they felt that *others* might possibly require the use of support services, although they themselves hadn't needed that help. Several respondents indicated that perhaps, in *another* course, in a different set of circumstances, they could imagine themselves using additional support services.

All the participants acknowledged, however, that they were appreciative of the presence of Athabasca University's support services. Some, in fact, seemed to use the knowledge of their presence as a psychological soother: just knowing they were there was enough. This was especially true of the presence and availability of the tutor.

The business-like approach of learners to their Athabasca University studies was also reflected in their repeated references to the concept of "value-for-your-money." Several learners had "shopped" around to several postsecondary institutions, looking for course arrangements that offered them the best financial deal. Also, in evaluating Athabasca University's general level of service to them, as students, they often reiterated the fact that they, as consumers, were paying a price for those services and were therefore entitled to a satisfactory level of service.

CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY AND REFLECTIONS

Summary

Although the presence of distance learning in our educational
spectrum is well established, the body of literature on distance learning
has reiterated, time and time again, the statistics on student attrition and
institutional drop-out rates. Themes revolved around "the loneliness of
the long distance learner" and writers discussed learners' interactions
with technology, new technological innovations, and learners' feelings
of alienation in light of their confrontations with technology instead of
people. My interest in the distance learner was nurtured by my dual
roles as both a student who has taken courses by distance education from
several postsecondary institutions and as an administrative coordinator
of distance education opportunities for a brokering institution.

It was my intention in this study to examine those learners'
perceptions of the support systems that they had elected to access during
their distance learning experiences. What expectations did learners have
of the learning experience offered by the institution, prior to enrollment?
What kinds of support services were made available to these learners,
and to what extent were they available? How, and to what extent, was
use made of available support services by learners? What judgements did

distance learners make of the help rendered them in meeting their learning needs by their use of support services? What kinds of support services would distance learners like to have been made available to them? In short, I wanted to understand, from the learners' point of view, the nature of their distance learning experience as it involved their knowledge of, their need for, and their use of support services.

To construe meaning from the learners' experiences, I chose a qualitative research design. A semi-structured interview strategy was used so that the words and experiences of each learner could contribute to the shape of the interview. Nine learners enrolled in Athabasca University courses were interviewed for approximately an hour each. The tape recorded data were then transcribed and analysed in conjunction with my notes, reflections, observations and insights from each interview. Transcripts were returned to respondents for reactions and changes.

Data analysis comprised several stages. Transcripts were coded initially according to the topics in the respondents' replies. These data were sorted into categories, and, after further reflection, were grouped into three large categories that aptly encompassed the span of the learners' distance experiences. These categories describe learners' involvement with Athabasca University: becoming involved with Athabasca University—learners' stories of the process of initiation and familiarization that they encountered at the institution; being a distance learner—respondents' perceptions of their abilities, needs, and problems as learners, and their thoughts and reflections on their learning

experiences; and obtaining support. Within these large categories, the range of experiences was displayed.

The subsequent examination of their data for the underlying sense of the respondents' stories brought forth several conceptual similarities which were presented as these themes: distance learners' accepting responsibility for learning; learners' controlling their learning; learners' being detached from their learning.

Reflections on the Relevant Lii ature

The field of distance education, by its very definition dependent upon the inclusion of technology (Keegan, 1983; Garrison, 1987), has as a result spawned a literature that focuses heavily on the technological innovations that underpin its development. The use of technology to deliver programming in distance education has lured researchers to explore issues of technological quality, quantity, design, cost, and implementation (Garrison, 1985, 1987, 1989; Bates, 1982).

An equally important facet of the teaching-learning interaction of distance education, however, is the human dimension in distance learning. Clearly, one of the outstanding "people" issues in distance education involves the sense of isolation that confronts many distance learners—a common theme that Kathleen Forsythe referred to as "the loneliness as the long distance learner" (quoted by Croft, 1987). Geographically, many distance learners are scattered across large rural areas, in learning situations that do not provide them with any

opportunity to meet or interact with their instructors or with other distance learners in the same courses. Although this scenario does not apply to *all* distance learners—a large percentage of enrollees are actually urban-dwellers, and many distance learning situations offer enrollees a chance to contact other students—the experience of distance learning, perceived by many students as being "alone," is often a frightening one, and the presence of support services can reduce the "natural feeling of isolation of distance education students" (Meakin, 1982, p. 158).

The provision of support services to distance learners, however, raises a number of controversial issues. These areas of concern include the issues of learners' self-sufficiency, the heterogeneity of distance learners, learners' self-direction, autonomy, and control, and the actual methodology of providing support services.

Learners' self-sufficiency

McInnes-Rankin and Brindley (1986) reported that "although it was once thought that adult learners could be largely self-sufficient, there is now a large body of distance education literature which suggests otherwise" (p. 60). Similarly, Hotchkis and Nelson (1988), from a study of both "serious" students (those who have completed six or more credits at Athabasca University) and students who had withdrawn from studies at Athabasca University, reported that learners thought that not everyone had the perseverance necessary to successfully complete distance studies. That study, however, raises questions about whether student drop-out was due to a lack of perseverance or was, in fact, the deliberate choice of the learner.

Thompson (1989), however, suggested that distance learning assumes large degrees of self-direction and confidence by learners, and the learners interviewed in this study proved indeed to be fairly self-sufficient and confident of their ability to persevere in their studies. An important contributor to this situation could be the fact that this study's respondents, as urban learners, had willingly chosen distance education for various reasons, and for them, aloneness meant privacy, not isolation. Their very presence in Athabasca University's program, therefore, demonstrates a certain level of confidence and self-direction.

Distance learners' heterogeneity

The findings of this study echo many of the ways that mainstream literature describes adult and distance learners. It is a tenet of distance education, for example, that the student body reflects a broad demographic heterogeneity (Thompson, 1989). Paulet (1987) and Coldeway (1986) stressed the many individual differences among students, emphasizing that the provision of support services may represent attempts by distance institutions to address "the large differences that exist between learners even within the same course" (Coldeway, p. 92). Coldeway suggests that one of the ways that institutions can address learners' broad heterogeneity is to provide a wide range of tutorial support to learners engaged in courses.

Self-direction, autonomy, and control

Recognition of the differences among adult learners, of their individuality and accompanying levels of self-directedness, has been a focus of Tough's work. Tough (1988) outlined the tendency of his fellow

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OISE instructors to adopt different and innovative strategies to change the locus of control in education from a traditional teacher-centred delivery to one centred on learner autonomy. "Although we use different approaches for self-directed learning, each of us in one way or another is trying to encourage the students to use the competence, skill, and power we know they have" (p. 7).

Paul (1990) emphasized that Athabasca University's ultimate goal is to develop independent learners. Likewise, Haughey (1990) stressed that in distance education, there was a shifting of power away from the institution to the learner, thereby enabling these learners to take control of their learning through decision and choice.

The issue of control also underlies Coldeway's (1986) reiteration of the need for "an 'andragogical system' which encourages and reinforces self-directed learning, as opposed to a pedagogical system in which the learner is only the recipient of content and instruction that is determined and delivered by someone else" (p. 85). Such a system would involve adults in their learning as much as possible. This study's findings indicate that purposeful learners anticipate and desire this amount of control of their learning experience. Like shoppers in a supermarket, with determination and deliberation, these learners systematically chose their educational directions and proceeded linearly through their subsequent learning relationships.

In his discussion of the concept of control in distance education, Garrison creates a triadic model of the educational transaction that defines the relationship between the notion of control and its variables—

independence, proficiency, and support. He concludes that, for learners, establishing control of the learning situation depends on a "collaborative process of assessing the dimensions of control" (p. 30). Negotiations between learners and instructors must occur in order to establish the optimal level of control for individual learners. Garrison describes his model as "theoretical and general" (p. 32) because of the many variables that constitute any given learning situation.

In a very real way, however, learners feel that the flexibility of home study and its consequent freedom to make decisions about where and when to study is a major contributing factor in their choice of distance education as a mode of study (Hotchkis and Nelson, 1988). Researchers at the Centre for Distance Education at Athabasca University (Conway and Powell, 1986) completed studies that indicate that 75% of their respondents *who had had a choice of educational formats* for their learning preferred the option of home study. These conclusions strongly echo the findings of this study, where the participants, for many reasons, valued the flexibility offered by studying at a distance—on their own, at their own pace.

Accompanying the notion of the adult learner's independence is the similar concept of the wealth of prior knowledge and experience with which adult learners approach their studies (Knowles, 1980; Cross, 1981). Although adult learners are highly motivated with very definite goals— either personal, academic, or vocational (Paulet, 1987; Stoffel, 1987)—as learners they are often not familiar with distance education procedures. Nonetheless, they welcome the choice of an individualized, private

learning environment that provides them with the best opportunity to give meaning to their learning situation (Haughey, 1990). Similarly, the majority of this study's participants approached their Athabasca University studies with very definite career-oriented goals, and most had consciously chosen Athabasca University's distance program to complement both their lives and their perceived learning needs.

Adult learners' independence, expertise, and expectations cause them to engage in learning selectively and critically. Moore (1989) explains this phenomenon as learners maintaining "control of the evaluation" (p. 160) in distance education, in that they often leave a course before its formal completion. Moore suggests that such actions often "caus[e] educators to worry about 'drop-out,' while in fact the learners have simply achieved their own personal objectives" (p. 160). Similarly, Tough (1988) defends the adult's choice of learning with this analogy: "If somebody goes into a library, nobody gets upset if they don't read every book in it. If they have obtained what they want from it, then that's great" (p. 8). And in a student's own words, "I may not have achieved anything in the eyes of Athabasca University, but I learned a great deal. I worked through them for my own purposes. I didn't have the time to demonstrate to the university [what] I'd learned, but I feel very positive about it" (p. 15).

The adult learners in this study exhibited the same sense of autonomy over both their learning and the decision-making process that surrounded their learning. Several echoed the sentiments of the student quoted by Tough as they articulated the reasons for the choices *they* had

made, especially when the exercising of those choices had resulted in learners receiving a final course grade that was lower than what they thought they could have achieved.

Kern and Matta (1988) investigated the issue of learners' autonomy from a psychological perspective. In a study that examined the influence of personality type on learning performance, they showed that learners who were detail-oriented fared better in decision-making tasks concerning the time management of their courses than did their less-objective peers. They concluded that if learners' needs, based on their personalities, could be better addressed by regulating the amount of self-control necessary, the subsequent reduced frustration level could lead to a lower level of attrition.

Certainly, this study's findings reflect an ongoing concern among learners with their level of self-control. Respondents spoke at length about their strategies for renewing their studies or re-energizing their motivation after a lapse or absence from their work.

Provision of support services

The provision of support services for such independent learners is a complex task. Whereas it is generally recognized that the provision of support services by the institution is necessary to humanize the distance learning experience (McInnes-Rankin and Brindley, 1986; Meakin, 1982), the question of implementation remains difficult. Coldeway (1986), describing the relationship between learner characteristics and learner success, observed that "students require and will use a variety of techniques to match their own style and reach their own goals" (p. 84).

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Likewise, Murgatroyd (1982) pointed out the complexity of the distance learning situation when he stated that there is no "fixed" or "correct" way of learning at a distance: learners discover for themselves appropriate and workable formulae for success. Institutions are challenged to find the balance between the provision of support services to a diverse student body and learners' demonstrated preference for autonomy (Moore, 1977).

In a recent paper addressing this issue, researchers at Athabasca University (Brindley and Jean-Louis, 1990) forwarded a new premise. Based on the assessment of Marquis (1979) that distance learners are not always equipped with the skills necessary to ensure their own success (p. 67), the authors noted a "change of direction from a strong philosophy of self-referral to one of intervention" (p. 67). Brindley and Jean-Louis then outlined their institution's Strategic Academic Plan to proactively improve completion rates by targeting students' "predisposing characteristics" that might affect their success.

The institutional decision to intervene in distance learners' learning by making some support services compulsory counters a widespread tenet of distance education that "by its very nature allows students to control much of their own learning" (Wilkinson and Sherman, 1989, p. 24). Brindley and Jean-Louis point out, however, that having an open admissions policy, as Athabasca University does,

> brings with it a certain responsibility to provide "safety nets"
> in the form of information, advising and counselling

services designed to help students become successful independent learners, being able to assess their educational needs and meet the goals they set for themselves. (p. 69)

Although they present a four-point plan for evaluation of this new direction, the authors also present a number of other related issues that must be addressed—issues of feasibility and fairness.

Several of the points raised by Brindley and Jean-Louis represent issues that thread quite consistently through the findings of this study. For example, the authors ask, "Is it fair to require adult learners to avail themselves of certain services if they judge that they do not need them?" The data from this study indicated that learners both expected and appreciated the ability to make their own decisions in that regard. In most cases, and for many different reasons, the learners in this study chose to utilize a minimal amount of institutional support services.

Another issue raised by Brindley and Jean-Louis in their discussion of interventionist action hinges on the measurement of success (p. 69). This study's respondents defined for themselves the nature of their "success" in their studies and, in so doing, replicated the conclusions of Murgatroyd (1982), Paulet (1987), and Tough (1988) that emphasized the highly independent nature of adult learners and their personalized visions of "success."

A model developed by Burge (1988) explored four areas of distance learners' needs in terms of the guidelines that those needs suggest for facilitators of distance learning. She outlined the following: educators

must assume responsibility for learners; learners must feel the relevance of their learning; potential rewards must be made obvious to learners; and learners must recognize a number of important relationships: their relationship to knowledge; their interpersonal relationships; and the relationship between cognition and affect. Although Burge called for the development of more intense and responsible facilitative roles in order to meet these learner needs, this study's findings indicate that the independent distance learner would not necessarily respond to such an extension of services.

Murgatroyd, looking at the difficulties reported by learners in distance education, revealed in a number of surveys (1976, 1978, 1979) that 50% of those students experienced problems in the planning and organizing of their time. He felt, therefore, that tutors should help students to understand their own learning styles and the techniques with, and assumptions under which, they learn; and to examine other learning styles, techniques, and assumptions that may be appropriate for them. While Murgatroyd's conclusions broach the call by Brindley and Jean-Louis for a proactive approach to the provision of support services, this study's findings indicate a high level of resistance to overt attempts by tutors to exercise control over learners' ways of learning.

Tight's (1987) studies with undergraduates at the Open University led him to conclude that face-to-face encounters were fundamental to learning. He contended that the reduction in tension that distance learners would experience due to personal encounters would lead to increased program satisfaction, and therefore reduced drop-out. Tight

found that support groups and self-help groups were also regarded as important to undergraduates. In this study, however, only a small number of respondents indicated that they would have accessed an organized support group if one had been available. The majority of learners e   ed satisfaction and, in fact, preference for the privacy of learning   ie.

The provision of support services by an institution can be closely related to the counselling function that precedes or accompanies it. Porter and Kelly (19 9) examined responses from East Anglian Region tutors and then described a number of problems facing distance learners—their failure to foresee intellectual demands of higher level work, their lack of background knowledge, demands on their time and the sustained effort required, their lack of study skills, their need for reassurance and guidance, and their lack of familiarity with their institution's systems. Based on these findings, Mills and Tait (1982) concluded that that institution should revise its previous system of student support. From their research, Mills and Tait surmised that institutional interest in the "facilitation of student learning and progress" (p. 53) could lead to a greater development of the counselling role.

What kind of counselling benefits the distance learner? The literature supports the creation of a supportive structure as a tool for the development of meta-cognition—a system that develops learners' abilities to learn and fosters in them an awareness of their individual strengths and capabilities (Haughey, 1990). Tough (1988) suggested two

types of related support services for distance learners, one to help them in the setting of their learning goals, to help them "get a broader, long-term vision of their goals" (p. 8), and the other a program to encourage planning and "learning-how-to-learn" (p. 8).

Most of the learners interviewed for this study had not sought counselling from Athabasca University because they felt that they had a clear understanding of their learning goals and program options. These particular learners already seemed to possess, and were using constructively, that "long-term vision" which Tough described as a desirable learning tool. Similarly, most of this study's respondents were able to describe their own personal "learning systems"—their strengths as learners, their weaknesses, and the structures they had adopted to facilitate their own learning.

Personal Reflections

The data, when allowed to unfold through the voices of the respondents, speak quite pointedly to the three themes outlined in the summary: distance learners' accepting responsibility for learning, learners' controlling their learning, and learners' being detached from their learning. My reflections upon this study's findings articulate my sense of the story that has been told by the data. What did I learn from this study? What questions are raised for me by these distance learners' perceptions of their use of support services in their studies? The

following series of associations and connections reflect on these issues and echo, in a not-unrelated way, the themes outlined above.

The broadest observation that arose from the study, while also the most overwhelming to me, was yet perhaps the most basic in its simplicity: the role of support services in the learning experiences of the nine respondents was part of a larger journey whose importance and vitality lay largely in the process, not the destination. In other words, learners' support services decisions, while important for their contribution to the learning outcome, were equally important in contributing to the learning process. Learners, in making their choices about which support services to access, which to make important, and which to ignore, were utilizing learning tools at their disposal. These learning tools exemplified their unique learning styles.

Moreover, the patterns of their learning, as defined by their use of support services, were consistent with their perceptions of the role and function of their learning in their lives and their careers. Those with utilitarian, serviceable approaches to their learning—learning which, for example, was directly solely towards career enhancement in a most pointed fashion, used available support services in a similarly functional manner. Such an approach resulted in the selection and use of only those services that were directly related to the level of success that learners required in their studies.

This "selection" phenomenon is referred to several times in the literature and bears on two of the study's identified themes, each of which will be discussed in turn: learners' accepting responsibility for

together, both themes reflect one of the prime goals of the educational process in general and distance education especially: the development of a mature and independent learner.

The degree to which the learners in this study accepted responsibility for their learning was overwhelming. Ross Paul, Acting President of Athabasca University, quipped during his address at the Canadian Circumpolar Institute's December 1990 conference, "Distance education is a wonderful field because learners assume all the responsibility for their problems and failures." This study's data would indicate that he is probably only partly jesting: indeed, no matter what the problem facing the distance learner—an administrative delay with the institution, a motivation lapse resulting in non-completion, an unpleasant interaction with a tutor—learners' explanatory responses tended to place the blame squarely on their own shoulders. A common rationalization was: "Well, I should have worked longer" or "I should have worked faster" or "I should have worked harder" or "I should have called sooner" or "I should have been more diligent."

The concept of learner detachment was a thankful discovery for me during the lengthy stages of data analysis because I had sensed the absence of "something." I had come away from each interview with a strange sense of disquiet and dissatisfaction. Why did each respondent seem so matter-of-fact, so efficient, so business-like? I doubted that it was my interviewing style, because I felt I had successfully established a friendly rapport with each participant at the beginning of the interview

comfortable. Respondents had been uniformly pleasant, helpful, forthcoming, positive—altogether generous in their donations of time and information. Regardless, each session had left me with the sense that something was missing.

Indeed it was. And the very fact of its absence was the revelation of note that created meaning for me from the other disparate pieces of data. These learners did not share a sense of passion about their learning—not a sense of wonder, nor pride of ownership, nor an emotion beyond satisfaction or relief. They were not unimpressed with the nature of their learning, nor were they dissatisfied with their progress or accomplishment. They were simply unimpassioned. Their learning was calculated and measured. As informed consumers, they bought the product they needed. These distance learners became the effective "drivers" of their educational experiences.

That my recognition of the absence of a sense of passion elicited in me such surprise is a reflection of my own type of involvement with my learning, and in the process of writing this work, I had to address my personal approach to learning.

Through this process, I realized that as a learner, I identify very personally and emotionally with my studies; my choice of program and courses has tended not to be grounded in economic or employment concerns, but rather to be oriented towards areas of personal interest and the curiosity of learning-for-learning's-sake. My reflection on these choices led me, in addition, to contemplate other life and career choices;

by reason.

My understanding, however, of other learners' more pragmatic realities shed new light on their "supermarket" selection of support services. With their required level of achievement very often predetermined by career needs, the learners in this study opted for the degree of support that suited their needs. If they had encountered no perceived problems in their courses, they had sought no clarification, no enlightenment, no enhancement of the obvious.

It was interesting to note, as well, that in describing to me the scope of their understanding and use of Athabasca University's support services, these learners dwelt most heavily on their interactions with their tutors, however satisfactory or unsatisfactory those relationships had been. Even in situations where learner-tutor contact had been minimal, learners' recollections of their learning experiences involved more stories of tutor interaction and more conjecture about other possible tutor situations than about any other single type of support service. It would seem that the presence of a human link in the learning process forges a bond that learners first of all readily accept, and secondly, have incorporated into their understanding of their learning experiences.

The shift of power from the more traditional teacher-centred educational model to a learner-driven and learner-centred model would seem to be fully expressed in the slice of educational process described by this study. These learners exercised their power to tailor their level of interaction with all facets of their learning process—with the institution,

through their degree of affiliation and adherence to materials; and with their peers, through their initial choice of the distance education medium.

The choice of the distance learning format is a telling one since the urban learner has easy access to any number of educational institutions and processes. It speaks of learners' strong determination to learn in their own way, with a high degree of control over their learning.

The urban-rural dichtomy is an important one for me because when I first began this study, my previous employment in northern Alberta directed my interest to rural distance education learners. Although this study ultimately focussed on nine *urban* distance education learners, its findings highlight some of the differences between the two groups.

The urban learners in this study, having consciously chosen their method of learning, relied for much of their support on friends and work acquaintances. In an urban population, the probability of knowing people with whom to share learning experiences is no doubt greater than in a rural environment. For most of the distance learners that I knew, the north provided a much less supportive environment—a smaller cohort group, fewer resources—that made it necessary for learners to depend more heavily on institutional support.

This knowledge complements the other findings of this study in their contribution to my present role as administrator in a distance education programming unit. In a very real way, my understanding of

the differences between urban and rural distance education learners can help guide my decision-making process as our institution attempts to provide meaningful learning experiences for our students.

Implications for Practice

The results of this study contribute to understandings on various levels of the use of support services by learners completing courses by distance education. Understanding the patterns of learners' use of support services in turn fosters awareness of some of the factors that underlie an institution's provision of those services.

Questions relating to the practice of distance education can be addressed from a number of different perspectives. This discussion will consider implications for practice from the points of view of learners, tutors, and administrators involved in distance learning.

Implications for learners

Distance education learners bring to their learning a wide diversity of educational and experiential backgrounds, expectations, and levels of ability and performance. Their high levels of motivation are fueled by strong personal agendas that reflect their perception of their needs. .

There are, however, in spite of the many differences among learners, several implications arising from the findings of this study that have general relevance to distance learners. Foremost among these implications is the notion that Athabasca University's system of distance education can indeed accommodate a variety of learners and their

personal—and however unique—learning needs. From a learner's point of view, then, awareness of Athabasca University's potential is a very basic starting point.

Learners who approach a distance education institution can facilitate their own learning in a number of ways. First, they should have thoughtfully assessed their own capabilities as learners and be fully aware of the totality of demands on their resources. They should be cognizant of the procedures involved in the type of private learning that distance education entails; they should adopt a timeframe and a sense of schedule. They should prepare a physical space in which to work—one that meets the criteria for study conditions. Above all, if learners become aware in their initial self-assessment of their areas of weakness, they should avail themselves of the study guides and tools—a part of the university's support services—that Athabasca University produces and distributes.

Familiarity with Athabasca University's support services can provide learners with the knowledge upon which they can base their next set of decisions: how many support services to access, when, where, and how.

Implications for tutors

Tutors were perceived by most of this study's participants to constitute the largest part of their use of institutional support services. Although several of the respondents had not contacted their tutors frequently or regularly, they uniformly expressed appreciation of, and a

sense of comfort in, the knowledge that tutors' expertise was available to learners if they thought that they needed that help.

Because the role of the tutor is a very important one in this particular distance education system, tutor training should continue to be an important part of Athabasca University's support services. Tutors should be aware of the vital link that they forge between the "lone" learner and the institution. As a part of this very critical and humanizing chain, tutors should be encouraged to make a series of initial contacts with learners, first through a welcoming letter, preferably with a picture attached, and then through at least one introductory telephone contact.

While most of the learners in this study admitted that none of their tutors' actions or behaviours had a serious effect on their learning, several indicated exaspۄ.ation with the narrow "windows" of access time that their tutors allotted for telephone contact. In this regard, it would be helpful to learners for tutors to schedule a reasonable amount of access time and then to maintain a stringent adherence to that stipulated access time.

Learners, regardless of how little they interacted with their tutors, always expressed an appreciation of their tutors' humanity. A sense of warmth and a basic friendliness are important tools for tutors to bring to their telephone encounters.

Tutors, while engaging in their telephone relationships with faceless learners, should recognize the tendency of some distance learners to be private and independent. Most of the distance learners in this study

strongly expressed their desire for autonomy over their learning. Tutors can complement this basic motivational force by striving *with* their learners to ensure their success as much as possible on their own terms.

Implications for institutional personnel

For purposes of discussion, the designation "institutional personnel" includes all those, aside from tutors, who are involved with the organization and delivery of distance education programming for the institution.

The learners in this study were unanimous in their praise of the materials that comprised their course packages. Everyone found the course guidelines and instructional packages very clearly and concisely written; several respondents indicated that they had had no need to contact their tutors for clarification of their materials. Certainly, the high quality of materials should be maintained and course design should continue to encourage learners towards self-sufficiency in their learning.

Course designers should recognize that because of learners' time constraints and their tendencies to assume full responsibility for choosing their own levels of diligence—therefore determining to a large degree their own measure of "success" in their courses—materials should be self-explanatory and flexible enough to allow mature adult learners the freedom to make appropriate choices in their handling of the materials.

Accompanying study guide material should continue to outline for learners a "how-to" approach to their studies. Although many learners did not adhere to the suggestions in that material, and several

could not remember clearly exactly *what* information had been contained in that material, most of the learners in this study indicated, nonetheless, that they had found the presence of those documents supportive, and they expressed a sense of "goodwill" towards the institution for making the service available.

Similarly, learners' sense of gratitude towards the institution was also fostered by smooth and cooperative dealings with the university's "front-end" personnel. Learners reflected on the degree of pleasantness with which they were treated and the ease with which their administrative negotiations were accomplished. In order to reinforce the importance of their mannerisms in exchanges with learners both on the telephone and face-to-face, university office personnel should continue to receive instruction and training in the practice of implementing distance education from a "people" point of view.

Lastly, several respondents indicated that the physical presence of an Athabasca University office or a piece of the university's promotional material had been important to them in their decision-making. In an on-going effort to maintain a high visibility in the educational community, Athabasca University should continue to present itself as physically as possible, though aggressive marketing and the widespread distribution of high-quality promotional materials.

Implications for Further Research

This study's findings shed light on the nature of nine learners' perceptions and their use of support services during their distance learning experiences. The data, although not generalizable, support similar research conducted both by researchers at distance institutions and by theoreticians. The findings, therefore, can guide institutional decisions relating to the implementation and provision of support services designed to maximize student success and reduce attrition at Athabasca University.

The information provided by this study is helpful in the context of the urban distance learner. The circumstances that determined participants' learning experiences and subsequent responses, however, are unique to the urban resident, and cannot be generalized to the large number of rural distance learners that enrol in courses either with Athabasca University or with other distance institutions. Part of the reason for this logic rests on the presence of the possibility of choice: as urban learners have consciously decided to learn by distance, it can be assumed, at least in some cases, that those urban learners are prepared to learn independently. They may or may not have the skills to do so.

The converse of this logic dictates that insecure or reluctant urban learners, or perhaps even those with a more highly developed social need, would elect to study in a more conventional format which would include the group contact or support that they wanted. A study, therefore, that looked comparatively at the support decisions made by

urban and rural distance learners would contribute valuable information to the overall understanding of the distance learning process, and clarify the distance learning experience in a geographical context.

One of the delimitations of this study was that it did not attempt to correlate learners' success in their courses with their expressed perceptions of, or their use of, support services. A study that attempted to attribute some meaning to learners' experiences in juxtaposition with the level of their success would yield conclusions and interpretations that would extend the findings of this study. Certainly, however, as evidenced by the findings of this study, one of the variables that would have to be addressed in such a study would be the tendency of adult learners to consciously select or choose the level of effort with which they pursue their studies. A correlation of those statistics would prove useful to both learners' perceptions of themselves and to their hosting institution, especially in the area of counselling services and study supports.

Similarly, a longitudinal "success" study that was conducted over a period of time and attempted to track learners' progress through a program, or through their affiliation with the institution, would provide more valuable data for student support personnel and counsellors. In such a longitudinal study, the types and directions of changes in learners' choices of support service use would be an interesting variable in predicting success patterns.

There has been much research on the problem of student drop-out in distance learning, and Brindley (1986) looked at the factors

contributing to student attrition at Athabasca University. It has also been suggested in the literature that personality factors are relevant, and indeed critical, to the prediction of student success (Kern and Matta, 1988). Between these two areas of research there exists a place for further investigation into the relationship of personality factors to learners' motivation and performance.

The results of such a study would be of academic interest to educational psychologists, counsellors, and administrators. However, the implementation of those results is a bit more problematic. Those concerns have been raised by Brindley and Jean-Louis in their proposal for a more proactive approach to the provision of support services at their institution. At what point is the line drawn between the two poles of institutional responsibility for learners and respect for learners' autonomy and need for independence? In considering that underlying philosophical issue, Brindley and Jean-Louis have presented several questions for discussion and further research (1989).

Finally, there is a need for research into the support services-related learning experiences of distance learners who have already left the system before completing their courses or program. *These* learners' perceptions of their use of support services would provide, perhaps, some critical answers to the questions surrounding their withdrawal.

A Last Word

My interest in distance education bridges my life as a student and my current life as a practising adult educator. The development of this study likewise bridges the realms of conceptual theory and practice in this particular area of distance education. As outlined in the introductory sections of this study, distance education in Alberta is considered a viable and worthwhile practice, bringing educational opportunities to a wide range of participants who were previously unable, for a variety of reasons, to access traditional postsecondary learning. The interplay of factors in the effective delivery of distance education, however, and in the subsequent ease and success which learners experience in their learning, is complex and multi-dimensional; there are important technical, financial, political, and human considerations that precede informed decision-making.

This study has reflected my interest, as an adult educator, in the human dimension in distance education. The issue of support services is a concern for educators who, in their advocacy of distance education, seek ways to enhance the quality of distance learning experiences. This study's respondents have added rich stories to this body of information.

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APPENDIX I

LETTER TO PROSPECTIVE PARTICIPANTS

Adult, Career, and Technology Education
Faculty of Education, 6th Floor Ed South
University of Alberta
Edmonton, Alberta

_____, 1990

Dear _____,

I am currently a graduate student in Adult and Higher Education at the University of Alberta. For the completion of my Master's degree, I am conducting a study of distance learners' perceptions of support services available to you during your Athabasca University course. Your name has been chosen at random from all students registered in their first or second courses at Athabasca University. I am interested in what you can tell me about your experience as a distance learner, and such information will be valuable to planners and deliverers of distance programming.

I will be calling you within the next week or so to ask if you are willing to take part in this study. Each respondent will be asked to participate in an interview of approximately one hour, at a place and time convenient to you. Each interview will be taperecorded and then transcribed. You will have an opportunity to verify your responses by looking over a written copy of the interview.

Should you decide to take part in the study, you will have the right to withdraw at any time. All information obtained during the interviews will be held in confidence, and no real names will be used at any time during the study or in its final draft.

Please feel free to ask me any questions about the study when I call you. I will be most grateful for your participation, and would like to schedule interviews as soon as possible.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Dianne Conrad

APPENDIX II

CONSENT FORM

for participation in the study *Distance Learners'*
Use of Support Services

The purpose of this study is to gather information from distance learners currently enrolled in courses at Athabasca University. The information gathered in intended to answer the question: what kinds of support services do adult learners engaged in distance education courses identify as being important to their success in these courses? The working definition of "support services," for this study, will be *any structure that provides assistance—either human support of an interactive nature or support from physical resources—to learners involved in distance education courses.*

Participants in this study will be interviewed once for approximately an hour by the researcher. All information gathered in the interview will be kept confidential, and participants' real names will not appear anywhere in the data or in the final draft of the study.

Participants will have the opportunity to review a copy of their transcribed interview, and will have the opportunity to opt out of the study at any time.

This study is being conducted, with the knowledge and approval of the Department of Adult, Career, and Technology Education, by Dianne Conrad, a fulltime graduate student in the department's Master of Education program at the University of Alberta. The study has been approved both by the University Ethics Committee (December, 1989) and by Athabasca University (February, 1990).

I hereby consent to participate in the study described above.

NAME: (please print) _____

SIGNATURE: _____

APPENDIX III

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AN EXAMPLE OF AN INTERVIEW

Is this your first or second course with Athabasca University?

Second.

What is this course?
Management Science 368.

Did you complete your first course?

Yes—a communications course.

Are these courses a part of a degree program that you're taking from Athabasca University or are you using them as options for another program?

They're part of Athabasca University's program. Bachelor of General Studies.

Have you taken other courses at a distance from other institutions?

Yes, I completed the CMA course in a similar fashion, for the most part anyway.

Why did you select this type of postsecondary experience?

Because I'm working fulltime and I did have some university from a few years ago and I just wanted to finish off some degree because I might need it, someday. You never know. (laughter)

Did you contemplate going to university in the evenings at a more traditional institution?

I had thought about it, to be quite honest, I don't like the classroom environment—never have. I found it a waste of time.

That's interesting and I'd like to come back to it. So you selected this type of learning very deliberately because you thought it would suit you?

Yes.

Are you at the same time taking a course in the traditional way—at the University of Alberta or anywhere else?

No.

Did you think that as a distance learner, you would have more of a need for support than in a traditional situation?

I didn't think that way, no.

Did you consider the concept of support at all?

Not really. It hasn't been that important to me.

Why is that?

It's just the type of person I am. Tell me the books to read, tell me what I need to learn, I'll do it, I'll write the exam, and I find that's all I really need.

Would you describe yourself then as a very highly-motivated learner?

[thinking] I guess so, yes.

Are you fairly goal-oriented?

Yes, I think so.

Is this the way you approached your traditional studies when you were doing them?

[thinking] Well, that was a different situation. That was 20-odd years ago. I did attend the University of Alberta for a while.

Did you deal with that in the same way?

No, because I didn't have a clear picture of what I wanted out of the situation at the time.

And so what do you attribute the picture you have now, to?

The maturity I've gained. I've had 20 years of work experience and so I know what I want. First of all, I know what course I WANT to take now, what courses I want to take, and what I want out of them, so it's just a clearer picture.

Did you shop around for this course, for this program?

[thinking] Not particularly, no. I just had a good read of the calendar, went over their literature, and it seemed to fill the bill.

Let's talk about the process you used to get into your course. First of all, did you know that Athabasca University existed prior to needing to sign up with them?

Yes.

How were you aware of them?

Probably just through, I suppose, the media, and you run into the occasional co-worker who took a course there.

Did that happen to you?

Yes, as a matter of fact, someone I worked with was a tutor there as well.

So you called Athabasca?

Yes.

And then what happened?

They sent me....I can't remember what happened. I called them, they sent me the calendar and some other information because I had asked about getting credit for other courses that I had taken at the university and in the CMA program.

And did they send you information on getting credit?

What they said was to apply, and then we'll tell you what credit we'll give you. And I did do that and I'd like to add that I found that they didn't explain the process to be followed very well.

So not knowing the process, you thought, this is what I have to do, and you submitted your papers, and how long did it take until you knew?

What credit I was given? It took quite a while, it was probably about 9 months but I must say that was due to an error on their part, someone forgot to punch some information into a computer or something so my whole evaluation process was on hold.

Did that alter what you were able to do as far as your courses went?

No, I just went ahead and I selected a course that I thought they wouldn't give me credit for and one that would be useful for my work, and I just went ahead on that basis, and I really didn't care if they didn't give me credit for it. That was OK.

And did they eventually give you credit for it?

No.

So you didn't think too much about YOUR need for support services. Did you think about what they would have available to support their offering of this course to distance learners?

To be honest, no. Going back to what I said previously about my method of studying....

So you got their package, and you sat down and looked through it. Was that your approach to it?

Yes.

What types of their support services did you use during this course—the current one?

The only support I guess—it was a forced support—was the telephone quiz which is to get you really to talk to the tutor, so that was the only contact I would have had with any support activity.

And you call it a "forced support" so you feel that was their means to an interaction?

Yes, I think the telephone quiz that they had was to make you call the tutor, more than [to get] a mark for your knowledge.

Did you feel it was a justified learning activity?

Not for me, no.

You would have preferred a quiz of a different type, or did you not feel a quiz was necessary?

Both, actually. I don't think a quiz was necessary at that time, and if they did want a quiz, I would have preferred a handwritten....

You REALLY didn't want to talk to that tutor?

Not really. Maybe you find that strange.

No, not at all. This isn't the first time that's ever come up.

You know, I've got no hangup. If I had a problem that I really needed to get some help on, to work my way through the course, I'd have no hesitation to call the tutor. It's just the telephone quiz is a funny way to do it.

Does it make you uncomfortable? Was it an uncomfortable interaction that impaired your performance on the quiz, did you think?

I'd say so a little bit, yes.

When you got your package of materials, there was a letter introducing you to the tutor; did you phone him before you had to?

No.(laughter)

Did he phone you?

No.

Did you expect him to?

I can't remember. One of the courses, the tutor never did call, but I didn't pay very much attention to it, you know, it didn't bug me one way or the other.

So other than the "forced interaction" of the telephone quizzes, you had no interaction with the tutor at all.

None. Not verbally, just the assignments.

You obviously then haven't had a problem with the material in the courses.

No, that's right. I shouldn't say that. I've had problems—again, that's just the type of person I am, I sit down and go through it.

Do you resolve the problems yourself?

Yes, I would say so.

Some people rely on other people, ask other people. Some people have friends who are familiar with the content area...

Yes, like with this pariticular course, for example, relates to some of the things at work, and I talk to some of the people at work, NOT to resolve the problem. You know what I mean.

So the support that you receive at work is more of a casual support, more of a friendship support?

Yes, that's right. Where we work, we go on lot of courses. It's a good company, that way.

Which is it?

Alberta Power, and so just as a matter of course day to day, interaction, we're always talking to each other about the courses we're taking. It's just an ongoing thing.

Do you find that useful? No, "useful" is not that right word; do you NEED to do that, do you think?

Sure, I think, especially if you can relate the course you're taking to the work you're doing, that's very useful.

So it ties it in with the actual work you're doing?

Yes.

Do you talk to anybody else about the course, especially if you're at a frustrating point, if you're having a problem?

Sure do, yeah. I do get mad at things quite easily, and she [wife] will help.

At the same time, you wouldn't interact with your tutor to express displeasure to him, or a sense of frustration with an assignment, for example?

OK, I guess the problem wouldn't be with assignments as such. You've gone through the material and perhaps there's just one thing you don't understand or something. I'll just say to my wife, read that and see what you think.

Are you relying on her common sense and basic intelligence or does she have expertise in this area?

Common sense and basic intelligence. Yes, she sees things a different way.

That interaction, then, on learning style......[flip tape over] the question then, was on relating to others for support...to your co-workers and to your family....[affirmation]. What about the first course you took? Was it the same in that course?

Yes, I didn't talk too much at work about that. It related very much to work. It was about solving problems in small groups. I didn't talk about it because (laughter) I guess that was a problem area at work. It was just something I was interested in.

Was there the same type of tutor system in place for that course or did you have more interaction?

Similar to this course. There was no telephone quiz. I did call the tutor. (laughter) I DID call the tutor. I called the tutor towards the end of the course to find out what was going to be on the exam—what kind of questions. That was basically it.

Were you encouraged to do that through the literature or the tutor's letter?

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Yes, I think it was in the letter to contact him if you wanted to find out what the exam would be like?

And did you receive satisfactory information?

Yes, he was very helpful.

Is there anything that you can think of that these tutors could have done to encourage you—the particular type of learner that you are—to have made more contact with them?

The only thing that I could think of is for them to call ME, you know, a couple of weeks after the course officially started, and I don't know why I really say that. I think that would break ice, more than anything.

Perhaps it might have irritated you. Some people find it an intrusion, especially if they DON'T want it.

Yes, I guess I kind of relate it to salesmanship, or something, if he was to call and say Hi, I'm your tutor, please call me whenever you want. I realize that that's a lot to ask of a tutor.

Actually, a lot do that...

[surprise] Really?

Yes, many do initiate contact.

I'm not saying that if that were done, I'd necessarily contact that tutor any more than I've done in these two cases but I think if a real problem DID arise, I'd be more prone to call that tutor

Did you feel a sense of isolation at all, just working by yourself?

No.

So you like best just to work alone?

Yes.

And it's been successful for you?

Yes, I've done quite well on the courses.

AN EXAMPLE OF A JOURNAL ENTRY

I've just completed "Peter's" interview in the conference room at work and it was so hard to get him to talk. He was pleasant, but nervous, I think, and seemed to be the type of man who is used to producing pat answers—very precise, very direct, very unembellished responses. Both the style of his answers and the thoughts that he shared were so matter-of-fact. For example, when he said that he had found classroom learning a waste of time....I could imagine that! Too slow, too interactive, too circular. He was willing to talk but so often his responses were just affirmatives and negatives, and I felt clumsy trying to draw him out. It seemed to work, but I felt awkward having to do it all the time. Probably my questioning should have been less directed with him. What was interesting was that, in spite of the terseness, he volunteered some insightful information about his own learning; like all his other information, it was right there, upfront: he didn't have to mull it over or search around for it.

I thought, given the type of person he seemed to be, it was a great irony that Peter expressed concern that his course turned out to be mostly quantitive, when what he actually wanted was a more qualitative approach!