Women's Experiences With Distance Education

2004

Jane Elizabeth Moody
University of Central Florida

Find similar works at: https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd

University of Central Florida Libraries http://library.ucf.edu

 Part of the Online and Distance Education Commons

WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES WITH DISTANCE EDUCATION

by

JANE E. MOODY
B.A. University of Central Florida, 2002

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of English
in the College of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Summer Term
2004

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines issues that affect women in online learning, and discusses four women's particular experiences in the University of Central Florida's distance learning program. Online education involves aspects of support and communication that may affect women's learning experiences either positively or negatively. Distance learning may also allow women to pursue their education while still taking care of their families and outside work.

In order to get a better idea of how distance learning impacts women, I discuss several studies that examine how distance learning affects women in particular. I identify three areas from this literature that seem to be particularly important in order for women to have a successful distance learning experience: social support, technical support, and awareness of differences in discussion style.

After reviewing the existing literature, I discuss how this literature applies to four women's experiences here at UCF. I talk with them about how they perceive their online learning experiences, and about how they feel that the issues identified in the literature are reflected in their own lives. I discuss their issues with support, technical support, and online discussions, and relate these to existing literature in order to come up with areas that may need further exploration or improvement.

I conclude the study by providing suggestions and recommendations for professors who deal with women in their online classes. I also suggest areas for further exploration in the field of women's distance education.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Women's Experiences with Distance Education

Distance education is being promoted by many colleges and universities as a way to meet

the needs of students more effectively, as well as to conserve academic resources such as

classroom space and faculty time. Most studies have concentrated on the benefits of distance

education in the university setting, including the benefits to students as well as faculty and

administration (Blum 1). Besides conserving resources such as classroom space and

administrative resources, distance learning can make a college competitive—students may look

at a college's distance learning program when making a decision about where to attend.

The University of Central Florida (UCF) distance learning program is already award

winning; in 2000, the university won the prestigious Excellence in Distance Learning Award

given by the United States Distance Learning Association (USDLA). Since the university is

already doing so much right, I explore what we, as a university, can do to make the program

even better for students, and particularly for women students.   In this thesis, I explore how

women's experiences here at UCF follow the literature; are these women experiencing the same

basic issues identified in the studies? And if so, what can we do to help ensure that women

benefit from distance education?

Defining Distance Learning

In defining distance learning, there are several different class configurations that all come

under the broad heading of "distance learning." Web-only classes, Electronic classes, classes

that are conducted with the students in one room and the instructor at a distant location, and

classes that require a substantial participation online as well as in the traditional classroom can all be considered types of distance learning. At UCF, these courses are called web courses and mediated courses. For the purposes of this thesis I am mostly concerned with web courses, which are taught completely online, and mediated courses, which are taught partially online. These are the most common types of distance learning classes held at UCF, and they are the ones that I am most interested in exploring.

This field is growing rapidly, but research into the unique issues raised by distance learning has not kept up with the proliferation of students who are taking online classes. Although there is an expanding body of research dealing with gender issues in distance learning, it is not sufficient to thoroughly address the issue. Many other sources, including information on gender and technology and gender and psychological barriers to computer literacy help to define some of the issues, and provide a framework for further research into gender and distance learning. Many barriers do seem to be most applicable to gender issues; women still do most of the childcare and housework in the family, and while these roles are changing, barriers related to technology, support, and time still prevent many women from obtaining a higher education.

In my thesis, I integrate information about women's experiences online at UCF into the body of research that already exists on the subject. I let the women speak for themselves and their experiences, and to explore what issues their experiences raise in the unique online climate at this particular university. I interviewed four women about their participation in distance learning for this project; asking them questions about such areas as why they decided to take online classes, what their experiences in online classes were like, and how they integrate the distance learning environment into their own lives.

Research Methodology

        The site of this study was UCF, a large, public university in Orlando. UCF's Distributed Learning department delivers traditional distance education via radio broadcasts, TV feeds, videotape, and ITS (interactive television systems). It also supports web learning via three modalities: online (W or web-based courses that may require attendance at an on-campus orientation and/or proctored examinations); mediated courses (called M courses, these courses deliver substantial content via the web and reduce classroom seating time); and enhanced with media courses (called E courses—classroom meeting time is not reduced in these courses, but there are substantial Internet/electronic mail components).

        I interviewed four different women who have all taken online courses at UCF. Participants were selected based on several factors, including the presence or absence of children, general college experience, and age. I interviewed the participants in detail, and recorded these conversations for later transcription.   Questions were leading, and scripted (please see attachment A, interview questionnaire).

        Permission to identify, contact, and survey these students was first obtained from the UCF Institutional Review Board. I provided the IRB a copy of the interview questions and the thesis proposal. I identified the women only by pseudonyms in the thesis, and in some cases modified the number, age, and sex of their children in order to preserve their confidentiality.

        I chose to use an ethnography process because there was not already a large body of research available, and I felt that an ethnography would help me identify potential problems that could be addressed later in a larger-scale survey. While these interviews do not represent a large participant population, the depth of the interviews may serve to illustrate and highlight some

issues that we, as educators, need to be aware of as we develop a distance learning program in order to maximize women's participation and enjoyment of the distance learning process.

The Women

The four women who were generous enough to give me their time and their insights were a varied group, ranging in age from 26 to 35-40.

- Ruth is 27, unmarried, and lives by herself. She has no children, and is an Undergraduate student at UCF, majoring in Liberal Studies. She works full time for a major retailer, and also goes to school full-time. After she graduates, she plans to apply to a Graduate program. Ruth has taken several distance learning classes, and she considers herself an experienced distance learner. She is currently enrolled in two online classes, and plans to take more in the future.

- Deborah is 26, unmarried, and living with her partner. She has no children, and she is a student in the Department of English Graduate program, majoring in Creative Writing. When she graduates, she plans to obtain an MFA. Deborah works as a Graduate Teaching Assistant at UCF. Deborah has only taken one mediated distance learning class; she may take another, but only if taking the class online is her only option.

- Naomi is married, and has three children, ranging in age from ten to twenty-one. She has taken a variety of web-related classes, including mediated as well as courses that were taught fully online. Naomi is a student in the Department of English Graduate program, and is writing her thesis. After she graduates, she plans to go on to a Doctoral program. She works as a Graduate Teaching Assistant at UCF. Naomi has taken several distance learning classes; she prefers distance learning classes, and plans to take more.

4

- Eve is unmarried, and lives with her partner. She has no children, and has only taken one online class. She, too, is a student in the Department of English Graduate program, majoring in Creative Writing. Eve works full time, teaching at another college, as well as working as a Graduate Teaching Assistant at UCF. After she graduates, she plans to obtain her MFA. Eve has only taken one mediated class; she would prefer to not take online classes again.

All of these women are ambitious, and seem to fit a lot of activity into a hectic schedule. All of them plan to pursue a higher education, and they seem committed to their schoolwork as well as to their careers. Naomi, who has children, seems to deal with the greatest amount of stress, but all four work very hard and fit the profile that some studies suggest is ideal for distance learning: self-directed, goal-oriented, and independent.

Distance Learning and Students

Distance learning has many benefits to students. Students look to distance learning programs to provide a convenience that is becoming more important as a growing number of nontraditional students go back to school. These students tend to work full-time, and to live a greater distance from campus. No longer are "typical" students living on campus, attending school full-time, and concentrating exclusively on their education. For students who live in remote or rural areas, distance learning may provide opportunities to attend college that they would not otherwise be able to take advantage of. More women are also returning to school, both to finish their primary college education and to pursue graduate studies in their chosen field. Distance learning seems to be particularly well suited to the needs of working women and

mothers; allowing them to attend classes while not taking time away from their families and their jobs. These classes can allow women to arrange their education around their schedules, and can increase their educational opportunities.

Distance education can also be problematic for students, however, as they struggle to balance the demands of work, family, and school. Distance learning requires a serious investiture of time—often more time than a traditional class. Classroom discussion that would otherwise take place during a specific class time must be written instead of just spoken in class, and this can be daunting for students who are unused to writing, and who may be self-conscious of their writing skills. These classes typically involve a great deal of reading, as lectures that would be given in class must be read online.

It is well documented that distance learning classes require students to be extremely self-disciplined; they must keep track of multiple deadlines, and direct themselves to finish work when they do not have a teacher standing over their shoulder directing them. Discussion in online classes can often be problematic—the nature of the online discussion often provides an anonymity that allows students to say things that they would not in person, including things that may upset or alienate fellow students.

Most of the research that has been done involves mixed-gender classes, and focuses on how these classes meet the needs of students in the general academic population. Not as much research, however, has been done on issues that relate to women's experiences with distance education. Time, the need for technical support, and support in the home and workplace are all necessary in order for students to succeed in the distance learning environment. Women may have unique needs in all of these areas, and there is only a small body of research that addresses this. Unless these issues are addressed and dealt with, the dropout rate for distance learning

programs will continue to be high and students will not be able to fully realize the benefits of this type of class experience.

Distance learning can also be more difficult for educators, as they must prepare lesson plans long in advance. They must deal with technology in a way that they may have little training for, and they must also deal with students' unique needs in an online classroom. Teachers as well as students must be extremely self-directed to make these courses work, as the "cyberschool" is never closed—conversations and problems may go on at all hours of the day, requiring a great deal of teacher involvement.

In this thesis, I discuss some of the areas where my interviews and the current literature intersect. I also make recommendations to help course developers and instructors address some of the issues that may face women, as well as other students, in the online classroom.

In Chapter Two, I provide a literature review that discusses issues that have been discussed in current literature, including issues that women may have with support from families, their workplaces, and their classmates; technical support and distance learning course design; and communication in the distance learning environment.

In Chapter Three, I discuss interview participants' needs for support, including support from their families, support from their workplaces, and support from their classmates. I also discuss some ways that teachers can help students find the support that they need while taking online classes.

In Chapter Four, I discuss students' experiences with learning, as well as some issues that students may have with technical support and course design, including access to computers, comfort level with online technology issues with instructional design, and. I examine experiences that interview participants had with their courses, and I also discuss some steps that can be taken

by both teachers and by the students themselves in order to help students become use the online course environment more effectively.

In Chapter Five, I discuss communication issues that interview participants may have had with the courses that they have taken, including how these students communicate in online classes, and what teachers can do to help facilitate communication.

Finally, I summarize and synthesize some of these findings, and make recommendations for creating an online course environment that helps enhance women's online experiences.

My goal with this thesis is to increase educators' and administrators' awareness of some of the areas where students in online classes may need support. I hope that by reading this work, others will be motivated to study this area, thus potentially increasing the body of knowledge available on this subject. I have had both positive and negative experiences with online education, and dealing with the pressures of online classes has made me aware that online classes seem to have problems particular to the online arena.

I was curious to see if other students had experienced the same types of problems that I had when taking online classes. Were they getting what they needed from classes, and did they find the online learning experience satisfying? Did they have enough teacher support, and did they have enough technical support? Did they notice any differences when communicating online instead of in the classroom setting? Those were some of the questions that I wanted to address in this study. I found that, for the most part, they got what they needed from their classes and that they were satisfied; however, I found a few areas where they could use more support in order to improve their online learning experience.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review reveals the importance of three types of support to students: personal support, technical support, and communication support. According to most of the research available, there is a possibility that students may encounter problems in the online classroom that may reduce their chances of successfully completing the course, such as family conflict, lack of access to computers or lack of the skills to use them effectively, and a communication environment that may be unsupportive or even hostile.

I want to begin by discussing some of the studies that have been done in the area of distance education, particularly the unique perspective of women participating in distance education. I examine some studies which have been done on how distance education affects female students, and find that, for the most part, distance education seems to be effective at providing students with a convenient way to take classes without having to drive to campus, arrange childcare, or take time away from work. Some studies, however, found that the distance learning environment is also challenging for students, and more research needs to be done to discover how educators can meet these challenges and improve distance learning for students.

Literature Review

The Benefits of Distance Education

Most researchers seem to agree that distance learning benefits the student population. The convenience and flexibility is attractive to students, and may allow them to pursue a higher education while still taking care of families and working. In "Distance Education can be Dynamic for Women," Amy Kirle-Lezberg suggests that distance education can help women

gain access to higher education because they can remain at home while still pursuing their

education (1). She identifies some benefits to women from distance learning, including freedom

from stereotypes, help with family care issues, and participation in class venues that they would

not otherwise be able to access. The child care issue is particularly important for women—

obtaining quality child care can be difficult, and without adequate child care, women are often

unable to pursue an education. Distance learning can allow women with children to pursue their

education while remaining at home to care for their children.

In "The Third Shift," Cheris Kramarae identifies some of the reasons that students choose

online classes, including flexibility that allows them to fit education into work and family

schedules, the ability to learn at their own pace, the ability to minimize commuting time, and an

opportunity to meet special physical and psychological needs (15-16). These students find

online classes meet needs that cannot be fulfilled in the traditional face-to-face classroom.

Patrick Sullivan notes that ""flexibility" was a major issue for both men and women. In fact, this

was the "most frequently cited positive comment related to taking courses online" (807). Julie

Furst-Bowe and Wendy Dittman also found that flexibility was an important consideration when

students were deciding whether to take an online class. One of their study participants

commented, "The flexibility provided through this program allows me to continue my education

and keep my job" (408). The flexibility issue is one of the major draws of distance education,

and is a very strong positive aspect of this type of learning environment.

Since distance education allows students to combine work and education, this type of

learning environment is particularly favored by working women who must juggle a career,

family time and the demands of an academic career, which Kramarae calls the "Third Shift"

(35). Kramarae cites the U.S. Senate in 2001, who found that: "the average distance learning

student is 34 years old, employed part-time, has previous college credit—and is a woman." (9) In-Sook Lee also states that "The Gartner Group (1998) estimates that 60% of higher education students will access content electronically by 2003" (1). Most of the studies cited convenience for working people as a primary motivation for taking distance learning courses. According to Borje Holmberg, distance education may even be used as a tool for social change in that distance education can provide opportunities for students who would not otherwise have a chance to attend school (3).

Issues That May Affect Distance Learning Success

Although many research studies have been done on the benefits of distance education, not as much attention has been paid to the issues that can significantly affect students' online learning experiences. Researchers are now beginning to address these issues in greater detail, most likely due to the proliferation of online classes and the interest academic institutions are taking in improving these classes. While these studies may need to be expanded with larger sample sizes and more qualitative results, the issues that are identified here resonate with most women. For this reason, I feel that they are important, and while they should not be used to make generalizations about the distance learning population as a whole, they can provide snapshots into various women's issues and help us identify areas for further exploration. I identified three major issues in the existing literature relating to difficulties that women have in taking online classes: issues related to communication and distance learning design, issues related to technology and access, and issues related to support. These issues affect a student's experience in varying degrees, with some issues being more gender-specific, while others affect most students to some degree. Because these issues with support do vary from college to

college, and because most of these studies were conducted with a small population of students from a particular school, further research should be done to verify the findings from these studies.

Issues Related to Communication and Distance Learning Design

Both communication styles and distance learning design can affect how students perceive their online education experience. The need for teacher and class interaction, the need for teacher accessibility and the course design are all factors in moving a traditional class curriculum into the online environment. Joanne Wolfe, in her study "Gender, Ethnicity and Classroom Discourse," defines CMC (Computer Mediated Communication) by saying: "CMC encompasses the range of electronic conversation environments, including e-mail and e-mail listservs or discussion lists; real-time, synchronous discussions environments such as Internet chat rooms; and asynchronous discussion forums such as electronic bulletin boards" (495).

Many studies have been done on communication in the online environment, and in one of the most important studies on gender communication, "Gender Differences in CMC Based Distance Education," Kimberly Blum highlights some of the communication problems that commonly arise in distance learning. According to Blum, a content analysis of computer mediated communication (CMC) messages in a distance learning program revealed that students' posts reflected the same basic learning style preferences for CMC based education as face to face environments (8). Basically, Blum agrees with most of the other researchers in the theory that women communicate to build community, while men's communication tends to be for task-oriented purposes.

Victor Savicki and Merle Kelly had similar findings when they studied contrasts in communication contexts in the CMC environment (818). Sue Herring also noted that "women and men have recognizably different styles in posting to the Internet, contrary to the claim that CMC neutralizes issues of gender" (para. 2). Savicki and Kelly did feel that concentrating on characteristics of the online environment, however, might be less productive than focusing on how language can be used to increase the intimacy of the online medium (824).

Catherine McAllister and Evelyn Ting, on the other hand, found in their discussion analysis of distance learning students that "it appears that male and female behavior in online courses may differ somewhat from discourse behavior in other online forums" (18). They found that, while men tend to post longer sentences, they do not post more frequently in the online learning community. They also noted, however, that females do appear to communicate more frequently for relationship building and men for task orientation, which seems to agree with the findings of Savicki and Kelley, Herring, and Blum. (18). McAllister and Ting's study is one of the first to analyze course content by using discourse analysis, and their findings seem to support some of the models while refuting others specifically for the online learning environment.

Most of these models support the idea of men learning separately and women learning in connected environments (Blum 8). While these models are relevant for examining how students communicate, many of these studies do not address how different communication styles can be used to make the online learning environment better. J.B. Arbaugh, in his study on gender and learning in a particular Internet-based MBA course, feels that encouraging collaboration in the online learning environment can bridge this gap between communication styles (505). While this study was very limited in scope, the emphasis on how collaboration benefited the students

shows how the traditionally more "feminine" collaborative learning style can be used to help all students improve their online collaboration.

Kramarae, on the other hand, notes in the "Digital Divide" portion of her study that many communication differences seem to be cultural or individual, not gender based. While she did find that some students expressed problems with gender and communication, many students in her study found other factors, such as culture and age, represented more significant barriers to online communication (44). Susan Clegg also cautions us in "Gender, Education and Computing" not to be so hasty in assuming that a barrier is gendered and not related to class or race instead. Clegg says that "The critiques from 'women of color' (Hill Collins, 1991) have pointed to the way in which an exclusive focus on gender relations at best marginalized 'race' and, at worst, was complicit with racist assumptions about the lives of black women" (310-311).

Kramarae does feel that the online environment often seems to favor men, where programs are designed to require a high level of self-motivation and high levels of independence (17). In fact, many women seem to prefer the face to face interaction in the classroom, as noted by Kramarae. Christine Von Prummer agrees with this theory that "support and connectedness characterize the learning styles of women distance students in a way which differs from the learning styles of men" (80). Although this statement seemed a bit stereotypical to me, many other researchers verified these findings, but further study in this area could provide more quantifiable results.

Kramarae also found significant issues related to learning styles in her article "The Third Shift." This work examines many different aspects of gender and distance learning, and brings together the findings from Kramarae's earlier studies. Kramarae notes that students often find that the lack of social aspects and the need for self-direction and independence in this type of

14

environment can be difficult to adjust to (17). She feels that a combination of online and traditional classroom instruction would be helpful, especially at the beginning of the class. Because the online classes require a great deal of self discipline, the distance learning environment may also favor motivated, older students who are able to pace themselves and complete their work with little feedback from the instructor (Kramarae 24). Because women who return to school may tend to be older and more disciplined, Kramarae feels that they may be ideal candidates for this type of learning environment. Students who do not fit this self-motivated, independent profile, however, may be at a disadvantage.

While distance learning programs are often thought of as timesaving, in "Identifying the Needs of Adult Women in Distance Learning Programs," Furste-Bowe and Dittman found that students viewed distance learning programs as particularly time-intensive. They found that students emphasized the need to be self-directed and motivated to finish the classes, but also felt that "if the courses weren't so time intensive, they could complete more courses each year and complete their degrees in a shorter amount of time" (410). I myself have found this to be true— the lack of structure and the need for self-direction made the two online classes that I took particularly labor-intensive. I often felt that there was no delineation between class time and personal time, and I felt pressure to constantly work on my assignments. When I attend a "regular" class, I find the structured class time provides a framework to define my workload and keeps me from feeling so overwhelmed. The convenience of the online environment, however, motivates me to learn to work within the online framework.

Another area that Furst-Bowe and Dittman identified as a barrier to distance learning success was a lack of instructor feedback and support (408). They found that thirty percent of the student respondents felt that they did not have enough contact with the instructor to provide

15

them with a positive learning experience (408). One student cited problems with instructor

contact by saying "I e-mailed a half a dozen times, called countless times and never even got an

answering machine . . . (it) gave me the feeling that the instructor didn't really care" (408-409). I

had a very different experience in my online classes, however. I found most of my instructors

very responsive, and most were willing to set up a face-to-face meeting to go over any issues that

I did not feel were addressed online. Instructor feedback is an important factor in determining

student success, and deserves attention in the distance learning community.

Issues Related to Technology

While distance learning design and communication are very important, computer

technology is also a significant aspect of distance learning. Most distance learning programs are

held online, and access to computers is often a determining factor in whether students have

access to distance learning programs or are left on the sidelines. In "The Third Shift," Kramarae

brings up the so-called "Digital Divide"— the idea that access to computers varies based on age,

class, nationality, race and native languages (25). This Digital Divide means that many of the

students who would benefit the most from distance learning—single parents, the working poor,

and other disadvantaged students—are the least likely to be able to take advantage of this

technology.   Kramarae also discusses the costs of a distance learning education, noting that

although institutional expenses are typically much less in the distance learning environment, the

cost of classes is usually the same as traditional classroom instruction. In some cases, Kramarae

found that the cost of distance learning classes exceeded the cost of traditional classes when the

need for additional computer software and hardware was figured in (29). In addition, taking an

online course requires Internet access, and with more households moving to cable and faster programs, additional costs are arising all of the time.

Related to the Digital Divide access barrier is the issue of a student's comfort level with online technology. In "Gender Differences in Internet Usage," Thompson Teo and Vivian Lim believe that "although women have the ability to be proficient in computing, computer reticence discourages them from becoming more deeply involved with computers" (285). The lack of technical support for online classes may discourage students from participating in distance learning. Tom Kubala, in "Teaching Community College Faculty on the Internet," advises that technical support is crucial to distance learning success. Students must have a user-friendly resource to answer questions on how to deal with the distance learning technology in order to succeed in the class (4). Computer support for online classes varies, and according to Emily Thrush and Necie Young, "Educational institutions are providing varying levels of support for faculty who want to deliver part or all of their courses over the Web, ranging from a completely centralized locus of expertise and implementation to an "on your own" approach" (50).

As another way to help improve students' experiences in online courses, Kubala suggests that an orientation session be held, in order to familiarize students with the course requirements and support. During this session, students get to know each other, and a picture is taken of them and posted on the class Internet site to help students picture each other as they type. Technical support staff is also present at this orientation session in order to answer questions that the students had about computer issues (333). In addition, Kubala suggests that professors teaching online classes work closely with university technical support staff, in order to help identify and correct students' technical problems before they affect the learning experience (334).

I found the support for UCF's Web CT classes to be excellent in general, and this definitely contributed to my comfort level in the online environment. Many of the other women in my class, however, had much more technical difficulty than I did. We found that mentoring the women who seemed to be having the most problems with technical support helped them to overcome this better than simply using the online help function. Clegg and Trayhorn believe that "the women and computing debate cannot be conceptualised as a female lack" (79) but rather that women's experiences in the computer world can be used to make the process better.

Issues Related to Support

Most of the literature dealing with issues in distance education deals with some aspect of support. Support from family, support from the workplace, and academic support are very important to distance learning success. When these levels of support are not in place, students are forced to either find some way to support their own efforts or, in some cases, forced to give up all together.

Family support is the focus of Catherine Burke's "Women, Guilt, and Home Computers." In this seminal study about guilt and support, Burke discusses the guilt that students feel taking time away from their families, as well as the lack of support from family members for the student's education. Burke's study focuses on women's access to computers in their own homes, and how the placement and use of the computer can be affected by power struggles within the home. The study found that women prioritize their family's computing needs, and may feel pressured to limit their computer time. They also may lack privacy to finish their schoolwork, and feel guilt when they perceived that their computer time takes them away from domestic

duties and relationships. This guilt, according to Burke, is a major issue with any type of education.

Burke also found that "When women pursue an interest or activity that does not relate directly to their domestic role, and effectively exposes and challenges unequal power relations within the family, they can often meet with strong, sometimes violent resistance from male partners" (611). This resistance is certainly an issue as women pursue further educational opportunities, whether the resistance is implied or overt, and contributes to the guilt many women feel for pursuing higher education.

In "The Third Shift," Kramarae states that "the mismatch between the realities of family life and images of the ideal worker and student is a widespread social dilemma." (31)   Kramarae goes on to explain that lack of family support often take the form of an escalation of bids for attention, destruction of course materials, denying child-care assistance, or refusing to set space and time aside in the household for study (31). Karlene Faith found that although most men were supportive of their spouse's education, several students reported the same type of sabotage in her program (11). She also found that women often "attempt to re-educate their husbands as to the fundamental inequity in such arrangements, apparently with little success" (11). Any of these behaviors contribute to a climate where the student's education is not valued, and where success is difficult. According to both Burke and Kramarae, women most often feel that they have to set aside their own needs for their families, and this affects their learning experience.

In addition to family support, Kramarae feels that students need support in the workplace. Unfortunately, workplace support, often in the form of tuition assistance, is often one of the first benefits to be cut in a recession. Because many students depend heavily on workplace support in

order to pursue their education, this lack of workplace support can seriously impact their distance learning experience.

Another area where the workplace often fails to support women's education is in the area of flexibility. According to Furst-Bowe and Dittman, most students seek additional education for job-related reasons (408). If companies do not support these efforts through flexibility in the workplace, students often feel conflicted about their need for education and their inability to obtain it. Furst-Bowe and Dittman say that "participants spoke of their employers as encouraging, yet it appeared that oral encouragement and financial support were more readily available than time off or flexible hours needed to complete course requirements" (410).

As well as family and workplace support, academic support services were reported as a serious concern for distance learning students. Furst-Bowe and Dittman found that students reported significant problems with programs and support services, and that "the participants believed that the institutions they were enrolled in were structured to meet the needs of traditional students, not students in distance learning courses" (409). Problems cited included offices that were not open after regular business hours or on weekends, administrative services that were not available electronically, as well as problems with textbook and library access (409). Most of the students felt that the institutional support would have made a difference in their ability to take classes, and that this type of support was crucial to their success.

Areas for Further Exploration

Most of the previous studies were small, qualitative studies, often interviews or surveys of purposively chosen students who were currently enrolled in a distance learning program. Further exploration of these issues with a larger or more diverse sample population will probably

generate findings that are more reliable. For example, additional studies might identify barriers most common to specific populations such as minority students, women, men, young students, non-traditional students, or non-native speakers of English. Other areas fruitful for future research include developing and testing methods to overcome issues identified in the present study, examining the role of learning and communication styles in online learning, and studying how specific course design features affect students' online learning experiences.

Karen Evans, in a study of issues with women's participation in technical education, suggests some strategies to overcome these issues, including scholarships to address financial issues, female teachers to provide role models and mentors, alternative flexible schedules to accommodate time constraints, and direct linkages to places of employment to address workplace support issues (11). Most of these suggestions would improve distance education for all students, not only for women. While Evans makes good suggestions, at the heart of all of these issues is one of female empowerment, and until women can remove their own barrier of guilt, they will not feel that they deserve to pursue higher education in the first place.

Most of the literature makes it clear that, while distance education gives many students an opportunity to complete college that they might not otherwise have, there are also many potential problems that students face in this type of environment. The amount of personal support and technical support that students receive is very important to their distance learning experience. In addition, the difference between communicating online and communicating in the "traditional classroom" can also be problematic for students.

In Chapter 2, I discuss students' need for personal support; from their families, from their workplace, and from their fellow classmates. I reflect on four women's experiences with

receiving support in these areas, and discuss some ways that educators can help their students

receive the support that these studies suggest that they need.

CHAPTER THREE: EXAMINING DISTANCE LEARNING SUPPORT

In this chapter, I discuss the issue of support. One of the areas identified in the studies as important to women's success in distance education is the amount of support that they receive from their families, their workplaces, and their classmates. Some studies have found a higher dropout rate for online classes, and if a woman does not have support, her chances of actually being able to finish an online class may be even further reduced. When I interviewed Ruth, Eve, Deborah and Naomi, I was expecting to find that they had significant issues with the support that they received, particularly from their families, but instead I found that all four of them felt, to a varying degree, that they had adequate support from their families.

I also expected them to have issues with support in their workplace; for example, most companies are more interested in their employees' contribution to their corporation than how their employees juggle work, school, and family. Three of the women that I interviewed work for UCF, which makes a difference in how they perceive their work environment. Ruth, who works for a retailer, has flexible hours that she is allowed to schedule around her classes.

One area that seemed to be problematic in their experiences was forming support groups among other students in their online classes. Students were used to getting together before class and hanging out in the hallways after class; most of them said that they missed that type of interaction. Students who feel that they are lacking that interaction may need to take deliberate steps, such as forming study groups, to make sure that they get the support that they need from their fellow classmates.

Students who are very goal-focused such as Ruth, may find other students to be distracting. She comments "My theory is that there is always one person in your class who

always has something to say about everything, and as I've gotten older, I've found that to be a distraction from the actual material that we're supposed to be learning." They may also have strong support systems already in place that help them deal with the lack of interaction in the online class. In these cases, online classes may allow these goal-oriented women to finish their degrees faster, and with less frustration. If the student feels that the college experience is more than just taking classes, these online classes may leave them feeling adrift and unsupported, leading to a decline in interest in their education as a whole.

Identifying the Need for Family and Workplace Support

Both Kramarae and Burke talk about a need for family support; Kramarae in particular focuses on workplace support. Her study reflects a need for women to have flexible work schedules and support from their workplaces in order to be able to successfully complete online classes. Burke, in "Women, Guilt, and Home Computers," discusses the need for women to have support from their families. She discusses women's perceptions of the support that they receive, and she finds that many women feel guilt when they try to allocate time away from their families in order to complete their schoolwork. The women in her study reported a lack of support, also, from their families, who would often escalate bids for affection and attention when the women were trying to work.

I asked each of the women for some information about their family situation in order to learn a little bit about what their typical studying conditions were like. I wanted to know how they carved study time out of their busy days, and how their families supported them in creating this time. I was interested in whether they lived alone or with a partner, and in how many children they had, mostly because I felt that these could be factors in determining how well

24

distance learning worked for them. I hypothesized that distance learning would be more helpful

for women who were juggling family, work, and school, and for the most part, I was correct.

Ruth lives alone, and finances her education typically through student loans, while

working full-time in order to provide the basic necessities of life. At 27, Ruth is independent—

no longer living with her family—and places a high priority on education in her life. She says:

"I like going to school—I like the whole learning environment, so what I hope to get from school

is just personal fulfillment from learning different things there." She does not mention getting a

better job as a result of her education, but perhaps that is because the college experience was so

stressed in her family, rather than college as a means to an end (a better job).

Deborah, on the other hand, lives with a partner, although she has no children. When I

asked her if she felt that she had more restrictions on her time than her partner did, she hesitated,

saying "I would say that he is away and works longer hours at his job, and I'm maybe at the

apartment more, but when we're both home at the same time, I feel like I'm busier; I feel like I

just have more around the house stuff to do."   This does reflect the stereotype that women do

more of the work around the house. In addition to working outside the home, Deborah did not

seem to feel that this was an unfair arrangement, given that her partner worked longer hours at

his job.

Naomi was the only woman that I interviewed who had small children living at her home.

She has three, ranging in age from ten to twenty-one, and all live at home with her. She is

married, but admits that she handles most of the child care. When I asked Naomi when she

studied, she admitted that she often works late after her family has gone to bed, and considers the

hours between 2:00 a.m. and 6:00 a.m. "her time" to do her schoolwork. In order to have this

time, she sacrifices sleep, preferring to go without sleep rather than spending less time with her

family. She drives the youngest children to school in the morning after finishing her homework, and goes about her daily routine until she can go to bed at around 8:00 p.m., when her husband is available to watch the children.

Eve lives with her partner, and admits that her study habits are a mess. She does place great emphasis on her schoolwork, however, and says that if she is dealing with a deadline, school gets priority over her work or her home life: "Basically, when I'm taking classes, schoolwork comes first. That doesn't mean I don't procrastinate—it simply means that if I have procrastinated, it won't be my school work that suffers—it will be my home life or my job." Her partner also works, and Eve admits that her partner has more restrictions on her life than she does, but she also works full time, so she does have to fit her schoolwork in around her schedule.

Since so much of the literature deals with the stresses of women's families on their education experiences, I expected Ruth to have a far easier time with school than someone who had to take care of the demands of a family in addition to work and school, but it seems that Ruth puts so much emphasis on her performance that she is under quite a bit of added stress already. So simply not having a family does not guarantee a smooth college experience. As women, we tend to create pressure to succeed no matter what our situation, so perhaps we just ratchet up our expectations accordingly if we have more time.

I was expecting to find significant issues with workplace support, but my participants all had work schedules that accommodated their classes. I would suspect that a wider sample population would have more significant issues with workplace support; employers typically are more interested in the bottom line and in an employee's performance than they are in helping them further their education. Many large employers, such as Lockheed Martin and Boeing, provide significant tuition assistance to their employees, which can be a help when family

finances are tight. Lockheed Martin and other large corporations may also offer flex time, or

flexible work schedules, as a benefit. None of the women that I interviewed worked for a large

corporation, although all of them work in fairly flexible work situations. This flexibility may

come at a price; the women that I interviewed, while happy with their workplace support, have

had to make significant salary compromises in order to have the flexibility that they need for

school.

      Three of the women that I interviewed work at the college; Ruth works for a private

employer, but chooses to work in retail so that she can have flexible hours in order to complete

her degree. I did not ask them specific questions about their work situations, because I obtained

enough information about how they prioritize work and school when I asked questions about

their study habits. All four women placed school as their highest priority after their families, but

the women who worked for the college may have an advantage in this area, because their work

and school environments are so implicit. Ruth's employer values her education, but since she is

going to eventually leave to get a "real" job, her responsibility for scheduling her classes and

schoolwork rest squarely on her shoulders.

      While most of the literature reported problems with support from families and work, it

seems that the women feel that they have adequate support, and for the most part, this seems to

be true. Perhaps as a society we are becoming more supportive of women as students than we

were in the 1980s and 1990s, when most of the studies that I reviewed were done. Another

strong possibility, however, is that my sample participants experience a significantly more

supportive environment than the typical female student. All but one of my interview participants

was a graduate student, and by the time that a woman reaches that level of education, perhaps

most of her support issues are worked out.

27

Family and work situations are typically outside the professor's sphere of influence. Professors may be hesitant to get involved with their students' private lives, but since this type of support may be vital to students' success in the classroom, an attempt to educate students about what they can do about these issues may help them find the support that these studies suggest they need. Discussing what issues the students face by hosting online discussions addressing potential areas of conflict with family and work, and helping students articulate their need for support may even be enough to help the students work out these issues for themselves.

Finding Support from Classmates

Cheris Kramarae notes in "The Third Shift" that women often do not view communication online as a satisfying interaction. The women that she interviewed often complained that the online learning environment did not supply them with the contact that they expected to get in their college experience. Christine Von Prummer also notes that "support and connectedness characterize the learning styles of women distance students in a way which differs from the learning styles of men" (80). She discusses how women seem to need the connection with their classmates in a way that men, who are often focused mainly on completing their courses, may not. In their study on a particular virtual learning course, Maggie McPherson and Miguel Nunes found that most students did have contact with other students outside of class interaction, and they found that students rated contact with other students as vital to their learning process (316). Most of the other studies at least mentioned student contact as one of the areas where online learning may be challenging for students.

The women talked about their experiences online with a certain wistfulness. They seemed to miss the time that they used to spend hanging out with their fellow students, and three

of them seemed to place high importance on this aspect of their college experience. College has always been about more than simply getting an education. The proliferation of fraternities and sororities, as well as the strong alumni associations, all indicate that college may be about forming significant friendships as well—friendships that students may expect to last through the changes in their lives. But how do these students form friendships when they never see the other students in their classes?

I asked the interview participants which connections made them feel the most satisfied, and Naomi answered: "Well, I think that if my classmates can get together after class and discuss the work and help each other, that's important." Deborah talked about the time that she spent in the hallways before and after class, talking about both the class that they were taking and their own private lives. Both types of conversations seemed to help her enjoy her class experiences.

Ruth seemed less focused on building friendships with her fellow classmates. She was focused mainly on graduating, and felt that her friends outside the classroom were her main source of support, rather than her fellow classmates. She, in fact, related that she found group project tedious, and often avoids classes if she is going to be required to work in a group.

It can be very difficult to replicate the type of interaction typically found in the traditional classroom in an online class, but one thing that I have seen work to build a sense of community in an online class is when the students themselves take the initiative to get together outside of "class" time to either meet in person, or to chat in chatrooms, and discuss their classwork as well as their lives outside school. Another thing that can help are face to face meetings—some professors schedule mandatory meetings at the beginning of class so that students can get a sense of the classroom community.

29

Chats have their own unique set of problems, mostly due to the synchronous nature of the conversation. People who cannot type very fast are at a distinct disadvantage in the chat environment, as well as those who take a long time to gather their thoughts. Chats typically move quite fast, with participants responding to each other in real-time. They work best for smaller groups—with a large group, it can be difficult to follow the threads of the discussion.

Some professors require students to register with WebCT's e-community, which allows users to enter a picture, as well a short biography, in order to help students gain that sense of community. I did not get the sense that the e-community took the place of the real thing. Even though all of the women I interviewed knew about it, and had been required to participate, they did not have many comments about the community, while they did talk at length about getting together with their classmates to discuss schoolwork and their lives. This lack of comments even though I asked them specifically about the e-community indicated to me that they might have a tepid response toward it. When they talked about their experiences with classmates in traditional classrooms, they became animated, but they did not indicate the same excitement when they talked about the e-community.

The e-community could be strengthened by having a more interactive page, perhaps, and by giving students time and resources to personalize this page. The page does follow the students through all of their classes; they do not have to create a new page every time that they begin a new class, but having more customization available might make the students more likely to use and populate these pages with personal information, rather than the way that they are typically used. Students typically access these pages at the beginning of the semester, and never refer to them during the rest of the semester.

Facilitating Interaction in Online Classrooms

Bruce Barker, in "Strategies to Ensure Interaction in Telecommunicated Distance Learning," talks about the need for connection, which he sees as lacking in the particular environment of the telecommunication classroom. Barker sees the professor as the defining force in whether the interaction will be successful or not. He feels that good professors can make the technology transparent, and can also facilitate communication both between the students and also with themselves, by asking the right types of questions and structuring the class to facilitate interaction, but professors may not be sure about how to help students connect outside the classroom.

Connecting with other students can help online learners get more out of their classes. Deborah talked about her need for connections at some length, because she often felt uncomfortable speaking up in class, and she felt that knowing the other students personally helped her feel more confident in speaking out:

> I like not just having the academic connection, but also maybe too, at least on some level, even if it's just telling a joke in class or something, to almost have a more personal connection. . . . I guess sometimes speaking up in class feels like a risk—you might say something incredibly ridiculous, so I guess I like to feel like the class would be willing to let some of that slide if they know me a little bit better they won't be so harsh.

This type of personal connection may be possible to generate in the e-community, but it is probably better built through online chatroom interactions, where people can get a better sense of how their classmates think and react. One thing that professors should keep in mind when they introduce a chatroom format into their class sessions is that most chatroom activity takes place away from the professor's facilitating presence, so there is the potential for inappropriate

31

behavior, including flaming, to take place. Flaming is a common tactic on Internet newsgroup discussions and will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four.

From these comments, it seems that students want to find the support that they need, but may not quite understand the difference between the effort necessary to establish a climate of support in a traditional classroom, and the extra effort that it may take in an online course. Professors can perhaps facilitate this process by encouraging students to form study groups, as well as by hosting and maintaining chat sessions where students can discuss their assignments. Required chat sessions must be monitored or there is the possibility that inappropriate behavior may intimidate some class participants. The professor can also educate students on certain facets of online behavior; much information is available about online interactions, and many Internet sites contain information on netiquette and flaming; if students read this information, they may be less likely to exhibit the behavior, or at least forewarned that it may become a problem.

Barker has a detailed set of interaction recommendations, including varying the timing of interactive segments, encouraging other students to answer questions from the class, and advising students in advance when they will be provided with opportunities for interaction (para. 8). He also places responsibility on the student for initiating and taking responsibility for their own communications.

Varying the timing of interactive segments seems to involve inviting participation in different ways, such as sometimes asking for comments before students read modules, not always after the reading has been completed, which seems to be the norm. This may work on several different levels, as students may be stimulated to respond to each other by the varying of response types, instead of just always responding to others' postings about the reading or discussion. Variety may also help keep students interested in posting. Deborah noted that she

tends to post less during the second half of the semester, when she is no longer stimulated by the discussion.

Encouraging or requiring other students to answer class questions may also help students feel more involved in the class. Some professors even encourage class participants to create lesson plans and "teach" one of the class sessions in real life, which seems to help encourage a sense of class community. Having students take control of the online class for certain segments of the lesson plan may help in a similar way.

Barker's recommendations for student responsibility also seem effective. He encourages professors to provide advice on adapting to the different challenges of connecting online, although most of his suggestions, such as overcoming TV viewing habits by concentrating, staying focused and asking questions—most of this advice is not necessary online. His statement that "distance students must be assertive" (para. 10) certainly seems to hold true online. He suggests that students be informed that, although they may feel that they are "forcing themselves on the instructor" by asking questions, they are actually building community by this activity. It is easier for people online to respond to questions than it is to interact with a typical response posting of a finite thought. Deborah's complaint that in an online discussion "there were a few people in the class who really had a lot to say and this was their chance to soapbox it."

Moving Towards Connection

Creating an online community becomes the responsibility of the students in the end, the same as it does in a traditional classroom community. Students must work out for themselves how they are going to accomplish everything that is required of them in school, but providing them with resources and advice will help them adapt to the online environment more

successfully. The professor can help by providing education about how the online environment is different from the traditional classroom, by facilitating communication between the students, and by providing opportunities and a safe environment for students to interact.

It seems that a need for support is a psychological necessity for almost everyone, but women, because they are so often the caretakers for their families, may have difficulty articulating their own need for support. While all of the women that I interviewed felt that they were getting the support they needed at home, they did seem to feel that the support that they needed from their classmates was often lacking when they took an online class.

In the next chapter, I look at how technology itself contributes to the distance learning equation. I am interested in what type of access students have to technology, their comfort level with online classes and with the available technology, and how well WebCT works for them.

CHAPTER FOUR: EXPERIENCES IN LEARNING, COURSE DESIGN AND TECHNOLOGY

Instructor performance has always been important to students' learning success, and Julie Furste-Bowe and Wendy Dittman, in their study "Identifying the Needs of Adult Women in Distance Learning Programs" reflect on this importance. In their study, the women that they surveyed said that the instructor was the most important factor in completing their course sucessfully, even beyond distance learning course design and layout (408). Most studies have shown that instructor feedback is particularly important when the course is delivered either totally or partially online. Furste-Bowe and Dittman relate anecdotal evidence that when students did not hear from the instructor on a regular basis, they felt that their motivation in the course was particularly difficult to sustain (409).

I was interested in learning about how Ruth, Deborah, Naomi and Eve viewed their professors, and the university, in terms of how well their professors and classes met their needs. In order to try to elicit responses beyond "it works for me," I asked them about their best and worst experiences in education with open-ended questions, such as "Describe the best professor you ever had—what made him or her the best?" in order to try to determine what types of teaching styles were the most effective, according to these four women, at least. Finally I asked them to consider any necessary changes to make college course to work better for them. I wanted them to think about and articulate what they needed to receive from classes in order to have a positive experience.

In addition, I was interested in how the online environment in the UCF distance learning structure contributes to students' experiences. How WebCT functions for students, what type of

access students have to computers and technology, and their comfort level with online technology may all be important in determining how well distance learning functions for women.

I felt that experiences with professors would impact my interview participants' learning experiences significantly; I also felt that they would experience problems with access to computers, as well as problems with the software that UCF uses for online course development. In some cases, I was correct, but I was surprised to find that my interview participants did not have as many issues as I expected in the areas of access and technology areas. They did have issues with some professors, but for the most part, they have had satisfying interactions with their professors.

I believe that these types of issues may have a greater impact on students than previously thought. While students may not always report these issues on evaluations, does that mean that they are not experiencing them? I hoped that by asking detailed questions, I might discover what my interview participants actually experienced when they logged on to their classes.

Examining Experiences with Teaching Styles

I was expecting to find mostly positive experiences with professors, and for the most part, I was correct. Each woman remembered someone who had inspired her, and usually had to think much harder to answer the question "Describe the worst professor you ever had." There were some areas, however, where their experiences overlapped. Three of them reported professors who were not motivated to teach, and who were perhaps burnt-out on the whole teaching process. On the other hand, all four women had many experiences with professors who were motivated and who created pleasurable learning experiences, as well as with classes that met their needs.

Ruth has had both good and bad experiences with professors, as well as classes, and she was very articulate about what she enjoyed doing most in classes. Not surprisingly, what Ruth said about her learning enjoyment relates directly to the typical content in online courses. Ruth says that: "I like reading and writing papers. Lectures are. . . ok. . .I mean, they're a necessary evil. Some teachers can pull them off way better and make them more interesting than others, but generally I like to analyze things and write about [it] and put my two cents in and research stuff." Since the online class environment typically involves reading lectures (most professors post their lectures for each module, and the student reads and responds to the lecture), Ruth's preferred learning experience fits right in to this environment.

Her preferred professor style, however, may be more difficult to translate into the online environment. Ruth says that: "The best teacher I ever had in college showed a lot of involvement with the class, with the students, with the material, with everything. If you had questions, she was there. She was flexible and she just was really enthusiastic and liked what she did, and you could tell [this] just from being in her classroom." Since Ruth seems to prefer an enthusiastic and involved professor, she felt that she may be more engaged if, in a completely online class, she at least meets the professor and has conferences or some sort of ongoing dialogue with them. Most writing classes, by nature, involve a lot of student/professor interaction—professors respond to drafts, students revise, and the process is both circular and interactive.

Ruth did, however, have a negative experience with a professor; one who "seemed to be not very excited . . . his demeanor when he walked into the classroom was 'here I am;' he kind of schlepped into the room, and he just, he never got a lot of things." She cited this professor's lack of enthusiasm, saying that he "didn't really stand out and make you WANT to be a better

37

student. He did get on your case if you weren't up to his potential of what he expected from class participation, from discussions, and that made me frustrated, but I don't know if you can ever change that."   In an online classroom, this type of apathy might translate into a lack of professor feedback, a lack of response to students' postings, and a general apathy about creating an interactive classroom environment. This was one of the main complaints in Kramarae's study "The Third Shift," in which her respondents reported a lack of professor interaction and feedback in online classes. It can be difficult to replicate the experience of asking questions and receiving immediate feedback the way that students do in a traditional classroom, but a commitment to responding to students in a timely manner online can go a long way towards establishing trust and confidence between students and professors.

When it comes to thinking about how to change college courses to fit her needs Ruth feels that "they seem to work pretty well for me right now. There's not really anything about the courses themselves that I would change. I kind of just deal with what I've been given and make the best of it."

Deborah's learning experiences were mostly positive, especially with particular professors. She spoke about a class that she did not want to take, but once she began reading the course material she was captured by the subject: "I guess that would be one of the best experiences just because it was something that my interest was organic, but not something that I was forcing myself to be interested in because it was for my major. It felt like a fun hobby or something."

She, too, had a problem with a professor who was prescriptive. He apparently had a set of answers that he expected for a particular discussion, and if he did not get the expected answer, then he would just say that he had not heard that particular theory before, and mark the students

down. She particularly commented on the professor's estrangement from the class: "I think that he was very tied to the idea of the professor in front of the classroom; up behind the big podium—not just the little tiny one that kind of sits on the table, but the great big one that covered him almost all the way up to his shoulders." This type of estrangement in an online class can take the form of not responding directly to students' questions, as well as responding to them in patronizing tones; particularly since there is a lack of emotional context in online discussions.

Deborah prefers learning in a directed environment, where the professor takes control and does not just assign presentations and let the students run the class. She says "I don't like it when I feel like the professors are holding back—they're keeping secrets from the class." This need for guidance may or may not translate well into the online class environment—she was not able to articulate whether she liked the self-directed module style learning environment online because most of her online class experiences were with web-mediated classes where most of the actual course assignment work took place in the classroom setting, and the online portion of the class was used almost exclusively for discussing course readings.

When asked what she would change to make college courses work better for her, Deborah answered: "I would not encourage the use of online courses because I think that if it's ever going to work, it's not going to work with the way that I've been taking courses." This negative association of online classes with wasting her time probably discourages Deborah from taking more classes online.

Naomi recalls a particular class that she felt epitomized her best type of learning experiences:

'Haiti, Harlem and Havana.' I think that was the best class. We got to read, every week we got to read a different book from those three [areas], and that was one of the best classes because I love to read and analyze. And then I wrote a paper on zombification in Haiti, and that was a really good paper because I did some awesome research and learned a lot about zombies.

Her experience seemed to be so exciting because she was learning about a subject that she was interested in, but the professor also contributed to the experience: "I think he was the best teacher because he allowed us freedom of thought—he allowed us to express ourselves. . . He allowed the class to kind of run itself while he backed us up."

She had bad experiences with professors who were unorganized, and one particular experience stood out, because the professor told them upfront why he was dissatisfied as a professor: "This teacher was an adjunct, and complained that adjuncts weren't paid well, so he didn't care what we did, as long as we turned in a paper, we were guaranteed an A in the class, so students weren't motivated, they wouldn't show up . . . I didn't have to push myself, because I knew I was going to get an A." While she does not think that much could have corrected this situation (besides paying the professor more!), she seemed to object more to the unorganized nature of the class and the lack of direction rather than the professor's attitude.

Eve agrees that the standards for obtaining a degree should be tougher—when I asked her what she would change to make college classes work better for her, she answered "toughen up the standards. Always have a perfect ratio of student/teacher involvement. Always have classes full of interested and engaged students." Even though her requests seem to be a bit tongue in cheek, there are some valid points there about her preferred learning style. Eve obviously likes

40

to learn in what she considers to be a lively, engaged environment, with a high level of professor involvement and with thoughtful discussions.

Her worst experiences with a professor were with one who "set no clear standards; was extremely unprofessional, which unfortunately encouraged the same bad behavior in me." This translates online into a professor who may not model appropriate learning designs, and who may not encourage interaction and engaging discussion levels. She expected professors to model appropriate behavior, and to encourage students to do their best.

Improving students' access and interactions with professors is an ongoing challenge, but some steps can be taken to improve their experiences in the online classroom. Perhaps the most important issue raised in my interviews was a lack of response from professors. Professors are already urged to respond to students' inquiries within 24 hours, and almost all professors see the value of doing this and respond accordingly. Educating professors about how important this response is to students, particularly online, may reinforce this practice, and may help improve student/professor relations. I do not think that this is a significant problem in most departments, but the fact that all four interview participants noted problems in at least one of their classes raises questions that should be addressed.

Examining Access to Technology

While the goal of distance learning technology may be to make the experience "transparent," research indicates that this is rarely the case; the interface is a rhetorical feature no matter how transparent the technology (Tovey 63). Further, students' experiences with technical learning situations are complex, and often involved issues of access that go beyond whether or not they have access to a computer. Internet access, while widely available, depends on the type

41

of connection, for example whether students have access to a high-speed Internet connection or whether they must rely on a slower dial-up technology, and the student's experiences may vary accordingly.

Catherine Burke discusses the issue of computer access at great length in "Women, Guilt and Home Computers," indicating that access in the home may involve more than just physical access to technology. She feels that women face significant issues in the power hierarchy of the home; their families' needs may often take precedence over their own when they decide how they are going to allocate computer resources. This guilt that women may feel over allocating computer access may be changing for the better, as indicated by my interview participants' experiences with computer use and access (610).

I expected the interview participants to have more problems with computer access in general; I have always had only one computer in my family, and have always had significant problems if someone else needed to use it. I have also always had slow, old computers with dial-up access, so I expected that this would be the case with my interview participants, also. I found, though, that the availability of lower-priced computing power, as well as the proliferation of high-speed Internet access has made significant differences in the lives of students. Two of my interview participants have high speed Internet access in their homes, and all four have this access available to them somewhere.

Ruth was the only participant who reported significant problems with computer access— she has a small, old computer and no printer. She also has dial up access only, so when she needs to download a large file, she must go to the computer labs at the university. She also uses the computer labs to print, saying "I don't have a printer yet, so I've had to print out all my stuff

42

in the computer labs in school for the last three weeks, so I'd say, for the past 6 classes I've had to drive over there."

Deborah also has dial-up access, but reports no problems with it. She is a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA), so she has access to a high speed Internet connection in her office. She also has her own computer, so although she lives with a partner, she has no problems getting access to a computer. She shares an office with several other GTA's, but they have worked out a system of computer sharing that seems to work for her.

Naomi seems very comfortable with the technology available to her; when asked what technology she has access to, she replied "Everything; I have a computer, Internet, fax, printer." When asked if she feels competent using them, she replied without hesitation "Oh yes, definitely." She also has access to the computers in the GTA offices, but chooses to complete most of her work at home anyway.

Eve has two people living in her home, and four computers, so she has no problem accessing one of the available computers. She also has "high speed wireless Internet, etc. All the bells and whistles." So she reports a high level of computer access and connectivity. She also has computer available at work, and basically lives in what most online course developers would consider as an ideal online learning environment: high level of access; high level of connection; high knowledge level to use the equipment that she has.

All of the study participants had at least access to computers, but I am not sure how that would relate to the student body as a whole. Most students at UCF have access to computers either on campus or off campus. There are several computer labs on campus typically available for students to use from 7:00 a.m. until midnight. Ruth, however, reported problems using the computer labs. While she feels competent accessing her computer at home for classes, in the

43

computer labs she has had to ask for help several times with logging in and printing her work. She felt like she received help at the computer labs, but the equipment is different enough from her home computer that it presents difficulties.

In several studies, even if the participants had computers and Internet access at home, they had difficulty in getting access to their own computers. There was often dissention as to who had the first "right" to the computer, and the women's needs were often placed last. None of the participants reported problems getting first rights to a computer to complete their schoolwork; Naomi, who has children, has a separate computer for herself and for the children, and Deborah, who has a partner, has her own laptop that she can use for her classwork. This differs significantly from my own experience, and from the experiences reflected in Burke's "Women, Guilt and Home Computers." The women in Burke's study reported difficulty gaining access to the computers in their homes; they typically only had one computer for the family, and the children's schoolwork presented an obstacle to getting their own work done.

Improving students' access to computers could take several different paths, including determining whether students have access, identifying students who may not have the technological skills to use the available technology, and identifying whether women may have particular access issues that need to be addressed. After students' needs are identified, professors can work with them to address their access issues, and perhaps refer them to technology support departments such as computer labs or tutorial sessions.

Examining Experiences with Course Design and Software

Tom Kubala, in "Teaching Community College Faculty on the Internet," indicates that there are several steps that universities can take during the course development process that can

help professors develop interactive, dynamic classes. One of his recommendations is that a web developer/course developer relationship be maintained to help faculty who may be unfamiliar with web design translate their course content into the online arena (384). Kubala also discusses using online evaluations as a part of materials to reinforce the course development process.

Thrush and Young, in "Hither, Thither and Yon: Process in Putting Courses on the Web" also recommend an ongoing evaluation program as another way to improve online course design. They discuss the idea that most evaluations of web experiences deal with student attitudes towards distance learning, and that not enough emphasis is being put on evaluating their technical experience (56). Most of the online evaluations that I have completed have had more to do with instruction than with course design and layout, so this may be an area to pursue further.

One interesting area that Maggie McPherson and Miguel Nunes discuss in "The Failure of a Virtual Social Space (VSS) Designed to Create a Learning Community: Lessons Learned" is that students apparently prefer to communicate via e-mail, rather than via discussion format. They also note that a key theme was the presence or absence of activity on a virtual space, which seemed to determine how students perceive the space. A space that was not active and updated frequently caused them to lose interest, which follows most of the established literature available on websites in general—if visitors do not see recent activity, they are likely to tune out.

UCF uses WebCT distance learning software, and this seems to be a common program around the country. According to Karla Kitalong, the WebCT software, which has been recently upgraded, works well to design online classes. One area where UCF seems to be particularly proactive is in assigning help to professors who are developing web courses. UCF assigns one web developer to each professor, so that the professor has one on one help in designing classes.

This is far beyond what is recommended by typical studies, and is an area where the university seems to be achieving the goal of creating a useable system.

None of the interview participants reported any serious problems using WebCT, other than occasional problems accessing the website, which may be due to routine maintenance or other hardware of software glitches. When I started taking online classes at UCF, WebCT was a tricky, fickle website, which would go down in the middle of tests and refuse to post assignments for students—it seems that things have changed for the better in the UCF online environment.

Ruth, however, did report some problems logging in to WebCT from time to time; she has also had some problems with net access that may not be related to the WebCT system. Further investigation may turn up more issues with the WebCT site, but for the time being, she is satisfied with the system.

Deborah also reports no problems with the system, although she admits that she uses it on a limited basis. She did talk about an experience in an online class, however, where she simply gave up trying to figure out how to use a feature:

> For the certification class we were given, I think they called it a sandbox site or something, where if we wanted to we could go and play; they kept telling us to go and play on our sandbox account, and I didn't know what they meant and they never showed us. So I guess once, again, I felt comfortable accessing information when I was told it was there, but that I didn't really ever figure [it] out.

So instead of asking, she simply gave up trying to use this feature. She never did figure out what or where the "sandbox" was.

Naomi has had good results from asking the Tech Rangers for help, and in fact, contacts them first when she had a question. Neither Ruth nor Deborah had even heard of the Tech

46

Rangers, so perhaps there needs to be more education in who the Tech Rangers are and what they do at UCF.

Naomi did have some interesting comments about finding assignments on course websites. She felt that it would be helpful if, when professors put assignments on the website, they made access to them available from more than one screen. She suggested that, in addition to having assignments available in the module where they are assigned, that professors also provide links from a calendar feature. Not all professors use this calendar feature; Ruth and I looked at two of the online classes that she is currently taking, and only one professor was using this feature. Ruth also found it helpful to be able to access her assignments from more than one page. How students access assignments and how they find information on course webpages would be an interesting area for future study.

It looks like there are not as many problems as I thought in either the technical support areas or in the access areas. The four women that I interviewed did not seem to have any significant issues in dealing with the hardware, software, and other paraphernalia that is typically used when taking an online class. I do not think that this comfort level and level of access will hold true for the general student population. My own students have expressed frustration with access, as well as with the WebCT system in their other classes.

Thrush and Young emphasize the importance of support staff for both the students and for the professors who are putting content online. If students can not access technical support because support staff is hard to reach, or they do not know where to reach them, or support staff are not able to answer questions, students' experiences suffer. Fortunately, it looks like we are doing a good job of supporting professors and students at UCF. In general, the WebCT hardware and software system also seems to be more stable than it used to be, and the websites are

improving and becoming more interactive. As long as the university keeps on allocating sufficient resources to continue this support and development, we should be able to keep up with students' needs for technical support.

Tom Kubala, in "Teaching Community College Members on the Internet," recommends support staff work with professors to integrate course offerings and web design, and UCF also seems to be following this protocol, which is encouraging for the professors who are creating and maintaining these websites.

Technical support and access are vital for students taking online courses; while none of the women that I interviewed reported issues with access, for the general student population, the availability of computer labs may still be an issue. Many times I have observed long waiting lines to use these computer labs, so expanding these facilities may be necessary in the future. If the university wants to keep expanding the availability of online learning, it is important to remember that providing access is equally important to ensure that all students have a chance to take these courses.

The women that I interviewed all had issues dealing with teaching styles, course design and software, but it is encouraging that they had so little problems dealing with the technology itself. My research seems to indicate that the university seems to be providing adequate technical support, both for teachers and students, although students may not take advantage of (or even need) this type of support if the website is intuitive enough. Professors should remember that students need more interaction and contact in online classes, and they should be working toward designing dynamic, interactive web courses that help make technical support less necessary. Further research also needs to be done on whether women have access to enough technology to make their online course experience work.

In the next chapter, I look at students' issues with discussion in the online classroom. We know quite a bit about how communication is different online, but I want to discuss how this affects the women that I interviewed. I was interested in learning how they perceive their online discussions. I also look at how flaming affects discussions online, as well as what professors can do to facilitate the online discussion process.

CHAPTER FIVE: COMMUNICATING ONLINE: HOW IS IT DIFFERENT?

In this chapter, I discuss how online class discussions may affect women, as well as the ways that they may communicate in their online classes. One of the main points that almost all of the studies make is that communication is different online than in the traditional classroom, and not always for the better. Students trying to recreate the classroom experience online may run into several different pitfalls, including a lack of knowledge about how communication in the online classroom is different from traditional classroom discussions, discussions that degenerate into flaming, and a need for professor facilitation of discussions.

One problem with communication online is the difference between communicating online and in traditional classroom discussions; online discussions require a tremendous effort on the part of students—anything that they would have simply said in the traditional classroom must be written down and analyzed, then posted. Also, rather than quick, off-the-cuff verbal responses, students must take time to craft a well-written communication that accurately conveys their position; all without the verbal cues that would tell them how their messages are being received. On the other hand, discussions online may free some students to participate in classroom discussions in a way that they never would in the traditional classroom.

Another problem that students may face is flaming, which seems to be prevalent in online discussion boards, and may also be present in the classroom discussion. Sue Herring talks about the presence of flaming as a significant deterrent to effective communication online. She does not provide an explicit definition of flaming, but in the online dictionary, *flaming* is defined as "To rant, to speak or write incessantly and/or rabidly on some relatively uninteresting subject or

with a patently ridiculous attitude or with hostility toward a particular person or group of people"
(http://computing-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/flame). One of the main characteristics of
flaming is the refusal to listen to another's opinion, although we usually only think of flaming as
hostile exchanges. The presence of flaming can make students feel anxious about participating
online, and can cause them to feel that their discourse is not valued, and can even make them feel
threatened.

Professors play a significant role in facilitating online discussions; their input and
participation can help smooth over the differences in communication, and their presence and
authority can help moderate heated discussions. They may require students to post a certain
number of times, introduce discussion topics, and mediate in the event of a discussion that turns
into a personal attack on other students. My focus here is not only student experiences with
communicating online, but how professors can facilitate this process and improve students'
communication and help them to feel safe in the online classroom. I believe that professor
involvement in discussions can help students become more satisfied with discussing class topics
online.

Examining Online Discussions

Women may have a particularly problematic experience with online discussions; in his
study "Gender Differences and the Online Classroom: Male and Female College Students
Evaluate Their Experiences," Patrick Sullivan suggests that "female students appear to respond
more strongly than their male counterparts both to the communication advantages offered by an
online learning environment and also to the more negative interpersonal aspects of the online

classroom" (810). He discusses how shy and quiet students may have a more satisfying experience online than they would in a traditional classroom.

Herring, however, discusses how some female communication styles, particularly attenuation, or hedging and expressing doubt, may work against women online. This attenuation may make male students in the classroom less likely to regard women's posted discussions as worth attending to. She calls for women to begin to recognize the methods that are used to marginalize their comments, and for them to not let themselves be driven away from the online arena by this type of negativity.

Examining Students' Perceptions of Online Discussions

I asked the interview participants to talk about their experiences online, and to discuss how they participated in discussions both online and in the traditional classroom. I did not ask them specifically about flaming, because I felt that if it had occurred in any of their online classes, they would talk about when I asked them about their discussion experiences. I concentrated most on what they felt were the differences between communicating online and communicating in the traditional classroom; I also asked them if they felt that gender played a role in their online discussions.

In general, the women felt that online classes were effective, and that they received what they needed. Ruth, in particular, felt that she communicated effectively online. Her experiences with discussions in the traditional classroom seemed to annoy her, and there was not a significant difference in how she interacted in either environment anyway, so she felt that perhaps she accomplished more online. Most of the students took online classes as a first choice, mostly for the convenience of not having to drive to campus for every class period. Ruth said that "at the

time I probably would have preferred a traditional classroom setting but I just took what was available." She later admitted, however, that the online class turned out to be a good experience and that now she has a preference for taking her classes online.

I was a little surprised by Ruth's confidence that she feels that she says what she needs to both online and in the traditional classroom. Most literature seems to concentrate on how the experience of being relatively anonymous frees students and allows them to express themselves more fully. Ruth, however, felt that in the online class "you have the ability to elaborate on your ideas without any time restraint. So the subject of WHAT I talk about is not limited or different but how much I would expand it is the difference."

Ruth seems to feel that she watches the clock more in traditional classes, not wanting to monopolize the time. She seems to be more comfortable expanding on ideas and carrying them to full development online, perhaps because online, people do not have to read posts if they do not want to (although reading and responding may be required by the class format); while in a traditional classroom, if a student is speaking other students are required to sit and listen until they are finished talking.

I asked Deborah if she thought men and women had similar experiences in online classes, and she talked at length about what she perceived as the difference. She did not feel that the men in her online classes had much thought beforehand about what they posted. She said "I've never felt that they've even held back or even thought for a second . . . I think that when I post online I think about it a lot more, and I hesitate a lot more, whereas I've never gotten the impression from any of their postings; they're still very long-winded and at times poorly thought out." She also felt that men were more likely to send out a message that they later had to apologize for.

53

Deborah did not feel, however, particularly comfortable communicating online. She talked at length about how other students could make her feel marginalized; she remarks at one point that she felt like "putting my hands up and saying 'fine, I can't participate in this discussion" when someone would begin to, as she put it, "show off" by spouting obscure theories. She also talked about the ebb and flow of discussion in a regular classroom, where she felt that she got both verbal and physical cues that it was time to discuss something else, or that the discussion was evolving. In the online classroom, she felt that "there were a few people in the class who really had a lot to say and this was their chance to soapbox it." In a traditional classroom, the professor might be able to facilitate the discussion and help students who are feeling monopolized to speak up and participate in the discussion; online, this may be more difficult.

When I asked Deborah if she says, writes, or thinks anything differently in online classes, she replied that she says things in a classroom discussion that she never would online, seemingly because of the lack of back and forth participation and physical discussion clues: "there's a lot of times in a 'real' discussion in a classroom where I would be able to chat with the person next to me to be able to get an idea together or ask a question or say things like 'I'm just putting this out there, who can respond?' and when I've tried to do these same things online it would never work." She felt that the online discussion format directly created an environment where people talked in finite, close-ended terms, rather than in the back and forth format that leads traditional discussions in interesting directions. To her, postings that had no questions, or that simply stated facts, were difficult to reply to, and created an environment that did not foster open discussion of topics.

Deborah also had insightful comments about the difference between communicating online and communicating in person; she talked about the permanence of online discussion: "it's there; it's not just like saying something stupid once where it just kind of disappears into the air—it's like it's out there, and with not getting responses, maybe I'm just a paranoid person, but I would assume that I must have not said anything worth responding to."

One area that Deborah particularly noted was that personalities seemed to come through quite well online—she talks about a class where they met half the time, and said that she observed the way that people were interacting, and that some of the same dynamics seemed to come through online: "the people who were willing to speak up in class were also the same people that were willing to send out a really long e-mail at the drop of the hat." She also commented that the classroom discussions were often hostile and divided along gender lines, and that this dynamic also seemed to come through online, as well.

Deborah was rather scathing about the requirements for discussion postings, saying that it was:

> Almost like people spewing opinion into a void, and no one would respond to it—it wasn't in response to anything else because it would be the professor giving a prompt like 'hey, let's respond to this week's reading of Chapter 5' and everyone would post something like 'I thought Chapter 5 was really good' but there wouldn't be any interaction between the students online, and so I really feel like it's not a discussion, and the only benefit of it is that it's a way for the professor to make sure that students are doing their homework.

In this case, she seemed to feel that professors required postings simply to have something physical to show that the students were working; this may be a valid criticism, however, this practice does encourage may students who might not post anything if they were not required to.

Naomi is a student who very rarely speaks out in classroom discussions. She does not raise her hand; she basically just does not participate, although she does listen to the discussions and finds them interesting—she just does not feel that she gathers her thoughts easily in discussions. Online, however, she is an enthusiastic participant; the online environment gives her time to formulate her opinions, and to post discussions that are well thought out and articulate. In Naomi's case, the online environment has a definite effect on her comfort level and ability to participate in discussions.

She still feels that she participates less if "I feel that the discussions . . . if people usually have better, more intelligent answers than I would have." Naomi still feels a bit intimidated by discussions, even online, but she much prefers the online format, and "the fact that no one can see me; that all eyes don't have to be on me when I speak." This need for anonymity is reflected often in the literature—it seems that, particularly for very shy students, the online environment may foster communication. Joanna Wolfe found that, "although Hispanic women in these classes participated considerably less than the White males, they also participated far more than the White females" (504). She suggests that minority women may be particularly empowered by the online environment.

Eve feels that time pressures prevent her from participating more in online discussions; she sees a particular problem in classmates waiting until the deadline to post their own discussions. If everyone else posts their primary posts late, then there is no time for her to craft her required replies. Most professors require that students post an initial discussion starter, and

then reply to a certain number of classmates' posts, which can create a time problem if everyone waits until the last minute.

Eve does feel shy online; she seems to hold back from participating online till she sees what the climate is like. She says that when other students are engaged in the discussion, she feels more comfortable participating; particularly if the subject is interesting to her: "Comfort comes from a respectful group and commitment to learning. Online stuff can be harsh because you can't read body language and intent, so feelings can get easily hurt. And I tend to be sensitive. So, really it depends on the other students and my comfort level with them." So although Eve considers herself "shy," if she is comfortable with her classmates, then she feels more comfortable participating in classroom discussions.

When I asked her if she felt that men and women had similar experiences in online classes, Eve replied that:

> My perception is that men have less filtering going on when they post—which also seems to be the case (to me) in class as well. I think what you get out of it depends largely on how willing you are to participate—i.e. actually read and consider others' ideas—rather than preach and convert. Sometimes I get the sense guys want to convert rather than absorb if you know what I mean.

Eve admits that this is a broad generalization, and that some women also do this, but she seemed to feel that this was a fairly gender-specific trait, which fits in with the literature that says that men communicate to give information; women to build community.

Examining Professors' Contributions to Online Discussions

One interesting issue arose from this interview: Ruth felt that it was much more important that she feel connected to the professor as opposed to the other students in the class. She felt that other students often interfered with her learning process (in which the professor imparts knowledge) by asking questions that were not relevant to the discussion, or by taking up too much of the class period. Online, she commented that she could better filter out these distractions, perhaps by choosing not to read the postings from someone that she knew tended to ask irrelevant questions. I asked the question "What type of connections make you feel the most satisfied with your experiences?" She commented that "if it's something that's important to the material that we're learning, if it's precise, and actually, if it's something that would involve a couple of other students, like in a group discussion, then that's also satisfying because you get to share a couple of different points of view of someone else's experience." So Ruth shows a marked preference for discussions and experiences that enhance her learning experience, rather than building community within the classroom.

Ruth did comment on a lack of communication with professors, although she did have some classes that seemed to require a lot of interaction. In one writing class, however, Ruth noted that there was virtually no interaction: "you just posted it and the teacher would read it. In the classroom we had more interaction, but not online." In this case, the posting was merely posting of assignments for grading, with no required interaction on the part of the students. Hybrid classes often follow this type of format, but Ruth found it unsatisfying, because she felt that she did not get the feedback from the instructor on her work that she would have in either a traditional classroom (where the professor might have written comments on her hard-copy paper) or a strictly online class (where professors typically write a brief feedback response to papers).

58

She also had no way of knowing if the professor had even read her comments, because they never posted any type of feedback or reply to her thoughts.

Deborah felt that it would be helpful to have the instructors post more. Out of three experiences in online classrooms, she only had one where the professor seemed to be an active participant in the class, directing and facilitating discussions. She said that this professor participated actively in the classroom experience: "if things were getting out of hand she would rope it back in; if she read something that was related, she would tell us about it; if someone was going on about Foucault and the rest of us were lost, she would explain it, or she would relate it to something we could understand, and so I liked how she kind of incorporated everyone."

Eve also feels that professor participation is an important part of her comfort level in online discussions. She feels that professors should remain very involved with their classes: "Participate a lot. If the instructor is in there posting or chatting, it feels safer. That sounds ridiculous from a grad student I think, but at the same time, there's a reason we don't just get in groups and teach ourselves." She seemed to feel much safer when the instructor was an active presence in the classroom, because she wanted the mediation should something occur.

Examining the Effect of Flaming on Student Discussions

Sue Herring discusses flaming in "Gender Differences in Computer Mediated Communication: Bringing Familiar Baggage to the New Frontier" as something that is practiced almost exclusively by men. I have observed women practicing this type of Internet behavior occasionally, however. In Herring's study, both men and women denounced flaming, but the behavior still occurred with troubling regularity.

Herring claims that men and women have recognizably different styles of posting to the Internet, and that men have much more tendency to flame than women. She feels that men have different communication ethics, and that while they tend to view flaming as "bad," they place a greater value on freedom of expression, and that they tend to view flaming as an expression of uncensored speech. There is no question that flaming makes people uncomfortable and unwilling to participate in discussions—particularly people who may already be hesitant about expressing their views. Flaming, therefore, may be a significant barrier to open discussions in the online environment.

None of the women reported flaming, which surprised me. Flaming has been present in almost every non-academic discussion board that I have participated in. I have also encountered it in the classroom, so in the absence of the interview participants' experiences, I want to talk a little bit about my own experience with flaming in the online classroom.

I have encountered minor flaming in a couple of classes. In one, the subject matter we were discussing was controversial, and tempers flared and students created a few derogatory posts. In this instance the professor stepped in immediately and calmed things down; the discussions after that, however, were fraught with uncertainty—would this happen again? In classroom situations, I have seldom encountered the type of serious flaming with personal insults that often happens in online bulletin boards. I believe that the active participation of the professor tended to regulate this behavior in the classes I have participated in.

In another class that I took online, the professor did not step in. The flame war eventually died out on its own, after everyone was tired of talking about the subject (and after we all had to move on to another module because of time constraints) but not before some students felt uncomfortable. Someone posted in a later module that they were not sure about expressing

their opinion about this new topic, because they were afraid of the discussion degenerating again into insults.

There are some warning signs that flaming may occur; watching out for these posts can help a professor bring the discussion back on track quickly. When the subject matter is controversial, such as politics or religion, flaming is more likely to occur. People have strong feels about controversial subjects, and, if they can not win an argument through logic, may resort to flaming in order to discourage other posters and force them to drop their position. Because women may be functioning in a stereotypical role as peacemakers, they are often the ones who feel disenfranchised in these types of discussions.

Many researchers feel that the anonymity of the Internet causes flaming—Herring disagrees, and feels that it is more a value system that places higher emphasis on freedom than on consideration that contributes to an unhealthy online atmosphere. She suggests as a solution that, "group awareness is a powerful force for change, and can be raised in mixed-sex fora as well." (para. 29) Education that flaming is a possibility can help students feel more empowered; if they can recognize this behavior as a common problem, it can help them feel that these are not entirely personally motivated attacks. Discussion of how different value systems affect posting styles can also help students recognize when their own behavior begins to swing towards this type of behavior.

Another way professors can help facilitate a comfortable classroom environment is to be explicit about what type of behavior will not be tolerated in online discussions. Posting a "rules of conduct" may seem strict and prescriptive, but many students do not really know what is and is not acceptable online, and giving them rules (for example, "do not attack another person, although you can argue their position") can help them feel more comfortable. Also, if they know

that the professor will step in if there is a problem, they may feel that the online classroom is a safer discussion area.

Fortunately for classroom discourse, there is a tendency in online bulletin board discussions for the issue of flaming to be handled by the board's own members. In online forums where I have observed flaming, one or two of the forum members have always stepped in to regulate the discussions, by either banning the offending member (which is usually handled by forum moderators) or by reminding members about what is and is not acceptable online conduct. Peer pressure and group solidarity can combine to create an atmosphere were flaming becomes self-regulating, much like it does in "real life," where human behavior is regulated by group discussion and action.

Examining the Role of Software in Online Discussions

Most of the communication that my interview participants report is in an asynchronous, bulletin board format. Synchronous communication, such as chat, is very seldom used in online classes, due to the inherent difficulties in getting the students to all gather in one place for a chat session. Chat software, also, can be problematic—students with a faster connection will be able to post faster, and the typing skills needed for quick "chatting" may make this type of format difficult for slow typists. It can also be difficult to follow a discussion when the posts are constantly pushed off the screen as in most chat programs—the new discussion information replaces the old information, which scrolls off the screen. When it works, however, chats can be helpful in fostering a discussion that comes closer to a classroom discussion. As I noted in Chapter 2, chats also work best for small groups rather than large, full classroom groups.

Naomi reports that in one of her most successful online classes, the professor and students agreed to meet once a week for a chat session. While the students did not always discuss academic matters, she felt that these sessions helped the students to "see" each other better, and helped to foster better discussions when they moved back to the asynchronous format. Since they had established a basis for communication, and knew more about each others' conversation and discussion styles, when they moved back to an asynchronous discussion format they felt more comfortable. Chat is not a substitute for online discussion, but it can be an effective supplement to it.

A full study could be conducted on the difference between asynchronous and synchronous communication in online classes, but for now, incorporating a small amount of "chatting," with the chat logs posted on the class website for future reference, can more closely approximate the give and take of the traditional classroom. Incorporating chats can help students feel that they are communicating both in a dynamic classroom discussion, and a more reflective, introspective asynchronous discussion.

Students often do not realize how different communicating online is from communicating in the classroom. Online communication lacks verbal cues, and we still have not worked out a good replacement for these physical and emotional cues that tell us so much more than the explicit message. We try to inject emotion into our online discussions, but smiley faces and ascii art cannot replace the subtle visual clues that we get from others' body language. Educating students about how communication is different online can help, as can modeling careful communication. Talking about how difficult it is to convey an emotion online can open students' minds to the possibility that their classmates may simply be having difficulty

expressing themselves, rather than feeling that their classmates are attacking them when they post a terse message.

Facilitating Discussions

In all of these interviews, we see the thread of professor involvement in discussions. Letting the students run the discussions is a valid rhetorical teaching strategy; however, in online classes, they seem to have a greater need for the presence of the professor, at least in the background, in order to reassure them and help them feel that the online discussion environment is a safe one. Facilitating discussions can involve posting discussion starters, responding to students' posts, as well as monitoring and making sure that students know that you are present.

Professors should also monitor discussions to help prevent flaming. A discussion environment where students feel safe should be a priority for all professors. Students also need education on some of the ways that the online environment can help, as well as hinder, discussions. Being aware that the online environment is different is the first step towards understanding how to facilitate students' experiences in online discussions.

The women that I interviewed seemed to reflect the idea that women do communicate differently from men in online discussions. They often felt marginalized and dismissed by classmates who would monopolize the conversation; too often, they would then remove themselves from the source of conflict by terminating the discussion. Herring calls for women to not be driven away by these types of discussion tactics, and suggests that education about how discussion online works may help improve students' experiences online. I have since talked to Ruth again, and she commented that after our interview, she felt that she was paying more

64

attention to her dynamics in the online discussions in her classes, and that she may be participating more effectively because of that.

In my Conclusion, I make recommendations for improving students' online experiences, using some of the information I gathered when I interviewed the four women. This study does not aspire to address the entire spectrum of online classes at UCF, but I hope that by studying these individual cases, we can improve students' experiences until more research can be done.

CHAPTER SIX: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

I began this study interested in learning more about women's participation in online classes. I was interested in learning how they managed their online learning, whether they had access to the technology that they needed to complete their classes, and whether they felt that online discussions were a viable substitute for classroom discussions. For the most part, Ruth, Deborah, Naomi, and Eve felt that they received what they needed from the online classroom; however, they raised issues with support, technology and online discussions that seem to warrant further study.

Ethnographies are best at raising questions, not providing solutions, but this area is so new that there are many questions which need to be asked. In "Hither, Thither and Yon: Process in Putting Courses on the Web," Emily Thrush and Necie Young reflect on their experience in creating web courses back when almost nothing was known about the effect of the online classroom on students. They feel that looking at distance learning in terms of what works in the traditional classroom may be "looking at things through the wrong end of the telescope" (66). The traditional classroom, however, is the lens with which students themselves are used to viewing their classes. They have a long history of interaction in the classroom, and they want the online world to provide all of the benefits of the traditional class, while still allowing them to work in their pajamas.

Creating an environment that combines the best of both worlds will take the dedication and focus of students as well as professors, because the online world demands that they learn a whole new repertoire of coping techniques. Educating women about some of the differences between the online world and the traditional classroom may be the first step in empowering them

and ensuring that they get as much out of online classes as they do from the traditional classroom, but there are some specific steps that professors can take now to help them maximize their experiences.

Exploring Students' Need for Support

Based on my interviews, I found that these four women did not have significant issues with support from their families or their workplace. I do not expect to find that this holds true for a larger student population, because most of the literature reflects a need for women especially to receive more support from their families and workplaces. I did find that these four women felt that they needed more support from their classmates than they were presently getting in online courses. Women have a well-documented need for connection and support, and ensuring that they get this interaction and connection may be difficult.

Professors can help women find the support that they need by, first, educating them that they need this support. None of my interview participants had ever really articulated that they needed support from their families, workplace, or classmates. They realized that they missed "something" in an online class, but they were unable to realize exactly how this affected their ability to form relationships in the classroom. Deborah was able to articulate at the end of our interview that she felt that "I think that you can never have the type of community that you have face to face, and I think that's really important, especially for things that are really built on discussion and sharing of ideas, because I don't feel that that's facilitated online as well as it is in person." This may be true, but if it is, professors need to be able to at least educate their students about forming communities online and how they are different from the traditional classroom community.

67

Professors can also help determine what kinds of support women need in order to successfully complete an online class. Asking questions about a woman's home life, while it may seem intrusive, can provide valuable clues about her need for support. Just finding out that a woman has many children at home, for example, can help; the professor may be able to sit down with the woman and discuss ways that she is going to manage her course load and take care of her children at the same time. The professor can also talk about the Counseling and Testing Center as a support resource for women who may be experiencing difficulty finding support for their educational efforts.

Talking to students about how they can begin to create a sense of community can also help, and creating opportunities for students to get together, either online or in person, can help facilitate this process. Many students find that orientation sessions, where they are required to show up for one class meeting, help tremendously. They get a sense of what the other students look like, and perhaps a sense of their personalities, which can help them deal with each other when they move into online discussions.

Finally, encouraging students to form communities, perhaps by assigning group projects, can help them come together as a group and learn about one another. Part of the college experience is learning about new people, and this learning can enrich not only students' college experience, but their personal lives, as well.

There are many questions raised about how students form online communities, such as "Do students form stronger groups in all-male or all-female classes?" Some studies suggest that the group composition may be a strong factor in whether students are motivated to form online communities. Another question that may be asked is what can be done to strengthen the e-community and make it a viable way for students to get to know each other. There is not much

information available about the use of e-communities as a support tool for students, but many online discussion boards use them to help members visualize each other when they are communicating in an online forum.

Improving Students' Experiences with Teaching Styles

None of my interview participants reported significant problems with their professors. Yet this fact does not come as a surprise. All four women are used to participating in the classroom environment; I would expect their experience to be better than average in these areas. The results of this study will probably not hold true for the student population as a whole.

In my interviews, all four women reported minor problems with certain professors, but for the most part, they reported professors who kept in close contact with the class, and who stimulated learning with their own enthusiasm. This enthusiasm seems to be a key to the students' experiences with online teaching; if the professor is excited about the subject, then the students' interest will also be stimulated. This is old news, but the way that my interview participants gauged the professor's level of enthusiasm online may shed some light on how to effectively stimulate interest online. The interview participants reported that teachers who kept in close contact with the students, and who actively participated in discussions, were perceived as more caring and more involved with the class. Women in particular seem to need this type of involvement; two of the four interview participants reported that teacher interaction was a key to their distance learning success.

Professors are at least as busy as students, and participating in an online class involves a great deal of work, so how can professors maximize their participation with their classes while minimizing the time they spend online? Paying attention to the kinds of interactions that

students seem to find particularly motivating can help. My interview participants all commented on professors who participated actively in class discussions, and who helped students articulate their thoughts about the topics. Professors who monitored discussions and who helped out students who seemed to be having problems with discussion topics also seemed to be particularly effective at providing interaction.

One finding that surprised me was the interview participants' comments about the required posting assignments. Most online classes are structured so that students post an initial discussion starter, and then respond to two or more of their classmates' posts. I noticed that one complaint was that students noticed when their fellow classmates were not participating as fully as they felt they were. Monitoring by the professor may help mediate this problem. In a traditional class there will always be some students who do not participate, and while professors may try to encourage these students to interact, they cannot force them to do so. Forcing them to do so by requiring a certain number of postings at least gets them involved, but a professor cannot force them to be enthusiastic—they will likely still be the person in the back who refuses to contribute meaningfully to the discussion.

There is still much to study about how course design and the need for more "transparent" courses will affect students. Two questions that could be asked are whether students benefit more from certain types of course design, and what can professors do to strive towards "transparent" course design? More research may help web developers and professors approach a course design strategy where the web technology and the course meld into something that guides the students into the material without becoming an issue itself.

Improving Students' Experiences with Technology

All four of my interview participants reported that they had optimal access to computers and technology. All four also had high-speed Internet connections available to them, either at home or in their office. This high-speed access does not seem like it would hold true for the student population as a whole, and further study to determine whether students have adequate access to computers or to hardware would need to be done to validate these findings.

Professors can help ensure that the students in their classes have adequate access to technology and technological support is to initiate discussion in the beginning of the semester to try to identify any potential issues and deal with them. Providing information to women about the computer labs available on campus, as well as about the technical support that is available for WebCT users, could certainly help ensure that students are getting adequate technical support.

Although all of the women that I interviewed are computer literate and have access to technology, they may not be representative of the general student population. Exploring the area of access at UCF could involve asking women in particular about whether they have any issues with technology or with technical support, and about whether they are getting adequate interaction with their professors. It might also be interesting to look at students' use of the computer labs; for example, are students, particularly women, getting what they need when they go into UCF's computer labs?

Improving Women's Participation in Online Discussions

The literature recognizes that men and women have noticeably different communication styles online; both sexes are likely to bring these communication styles into the online classroom. My interview participants noted some marginalization of their opinions in online

71

classes, which may have created a situation where they did not feel as comfortable posting. Some areas still exist where student communication falls short of an ideal exchange of views and information.

Most of the women that I interviewed had experienced at least some difficulty in communicating online, but none reported any serious dismissive or hostile behavior such as flaming. I did encounter flaming on two separate occasions, and it would be interesting to examine a number of class discussions to see if this behavior is truly not taking place, or if perhaps students do not recognize this behavior when it happens. In the meantime, there are a few things that professors can do to help create a comfortable environment for their students in online discussions.

There are some established protocols in online discussion forums that professors can use to help their classes learn to communicate more effectively online. Most discussion websites have a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section where they explicitly detail what is and is not acceptable behavior on the forum. Having these policies in writing gives the professor something to refer students to in the event of a problem, and can also help educate students about how their posts are perceived in the online world.

Many students simply do not realize how they are perceived online. They may believe that they are being appropriate, but without the normal body language and tonal clues that students are used to dealing with in person, they may be perceived by the others in the class as hostile or condescending. Education about how communication is different or more difficult online may help these students to communicate more effectively.

Keeping an open and visible presence in the classroom can also help regulate student behavior. If students know that a professor is watching them and grading them on their

discussions, they may be more likely to behave appropriately and communicate more effectively. A professor can also gently steer the discussion back on topic by providing more discussion prompts or by directing students' attention to areas where their postings are beginning to reflect common issues with online communication..

Most of the problems with communicating online arise from the same atmosphere that also makes communication online effective; namely, the anonymity of the Internet. Students who might be hesitant to speak up in class may be more likely to communicate in the relative anonymity of the online classroom, but students who are likely to be more restrained in the classroom may become more hostile or more open to criticizing other students online.

There is much research that could be done about communication online; I feel that this study only peripherally addresses what actually goes on in the online discussion arena. One area for further study might be to take actual classroom discussions and analyze them for gendered content, or for hostility levels.

Another area that is brought up in Joanne Wolfe's "Gender, Ethnicity and Classroom Discourse," is the dual effect that both gender and ethnicity may have on classroom discussions. Her study examines Hispanic women's participation in online classes; she finds that ethnicity may have at least as great an effect as gender on online classroom participation. This would be a rich area for further exploration.

Still another area that needs to be investigated is how the relative permanence of online versus classroom discourse affects the class discussion format. Does the online discussion become something more because it remains after the students have gone?

In some ways, I feel that this study raises more questions than it answers, but some of the recommendations that I make can be implemented while we do further study on some of the

73

issues raised in this thesis. Large-scale studies on the female student population at UCF may shed some light about the issues that are particular to this university, and working with other researchers in this area may finally give us some understanding of the unique needs of women who are trying to learn online.

APPENDIX: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Name:

Age:

Family/Background

Would you classify your family as middle, upper, or lower class?

Was getting a college degree stressed in your family?

How are you financing your education?

How far have you gone in your education? How far do you want to go?

Are you married or do you have a live-in partner?

Do you have children? If so, how many? What are their ages/sexes?

What do you expect to get from your education?

What kinds of classes do you have left to take?

What is your educational process like – how do you work in your classes?

     Do you tend to study at home, or in the library/office?

     What does your process of studying look like?

     How does it work for you?

Learning Styles and Experiences

What have been your best educational experiences?

What have been your worst?

Describe the best teacher you ever had. What made him or her the best?

Describe the worst teacher you ever had. Can you describe what made this a bad experience?

What do you think might have corrected this situation?

How do you most enjoy learning?

What would you change to make college courses work better for you?

Examining Online Experiences

Have you ever taken an online course?

Was this your first choice (over taking a traditional classroom course)?

What were your expectations from this course?

How did your experiences differ from your expectations?

What online class did you have the MOST interaction with your teacher in? Which class did you

have the LEAST?

What online class did you have the MOST interaction with your fellow students in? Which class

did you have the LEAST?

Can you tell me about a time when things worked well for you in an online class?

How about a time when they didn't?

Do you say, write, think, or do things in the online class that you wouldn't do in a classroom?

Do online classes make it easier for you to take classes?

Learning Situation

How do you allocate time to do your schoolwork? If you have children, who watches them when

you work?

What time of day do you typically complete your schoolwork?

What information technologies do you have access to in order to complete your classwork

(computer, remote access, etc.)? Do you feel competent in using them?

Who has first rights to the computer at your house?

If you are married, or living with your partner, do you have more restrictions on your time than

they do?

When you have technical questions about your online courses, where do you go for help? Do you

feel like you get help? How could your sources help you more?

Do your family finances have an impact on what courses you take and where you take them?

Do you enjoy classroom discussions? Do you participate in them?

Is it important to you to feel that you are connected to the teacher and other students? If so, what

type of connections make you feel the most satisfied with your experiences?

Online Discussion Experiences

Do you think that women and men have similar experiences in online classes?

What has been the gender composition of the online classes that you've taken? How could you

tell this?

What makes you participate less often in online discussions? More often?

If you feel uncomfortable participating, what is the environment like? What makes you

comfortable?

What can the instructor do to make the experience more comfortable?

What do you like about online classes? Is there anything that you dislike about them?

LIST OF REFERENCES

Arbaugh, J.B. "An Exploratory Study of the Effects of Gender on Student Learning and Class Participation in an Internet-Based MBA Course." Management Learning. Vol. 31(4). (2000): 503-519.

Barker, Bruce. "Strategies to Ensure Interaction in Telecommunicated Distance Learning." ACSDE Research Monograph, 1995. http://www.csusm.edu/ilast/vcyear3/transactional/Barker.htm. Accessed 06/23/04.

Blum, Kimberly Dawn. "Gender Differences in CMC-Based Distance Education." Feminista. http://www.feminista.com/v2n5/blum.html.

Burke, Catherine. "Women, Guilt and Home Computers." CyberPsychology & Behavior 4 (2001): 609-615.

Clegg, Susan. "Theorising the Machine: Gender, Education and Computing." Gender and Education. Vol. 13, No. 3. (2001): 307-324.

Clegg, Susan and Trayhorn, Deborah. "Gender and Computing: Not the Same Old Problem." British Educational Research Journal. Vol 26, No. 1. (1999): 75-89.

"Deborah." Personal Interview. June 11, 2004.

Evans, Karen. "Barriers to Participation of Women in Technological Education and the Role of Distance Education." The Commonwealth of Learning. 1995. http://www.col.org/barriers.htm. Accessed 10/30/2002.

"Eve." Personal Interview. June 13, 2004.

Faith, Karlene, ed. Toward New Horizons for Women in Distance Education: International Perspectives. London: Routledge, 1988.

Furst-Bowe, Julie and Wendy Dittmann. "Identifying the Needs of Adult Women in Distance

      Learning Programs." International Journal of Instructional Media 28 (2001): 405-13.

Garrison, Randy. "Theoretical Challenges for Distance Education in the 21st Century: A Shift

      from Structural to Transactional Issues." International Review of Research in Of Distance

      Learning 1.1 (June 2000): 1-17.

Herring, Susan. "Gender Differences in Computer Mediated Communication: Bringing Familiar

      Baggage to the New Frontier." http://www.cpsr.org/cpsr/gender/herring.txt. Accessed

      04/10/04.

Holmberg, Borje. "The Sphere of Distance-Education Theory Revisited." ZIFF Papiere 98.

      Hagen, Ger.: Fern U Institute for Research into Distance Education, Sept. 1995.

Javid, Mahnaz. "Women and Online Communities: Symbiotic Model for a Working

      Cyberschool: The Tentative Findings of a Two-Year Case Study." IEEE. September

      1999. (1999): 383-392.

Kitalong, Karla. Personal Interview. June 10, 2004.

Kramarae, Cheris. The Third Shift: Women Learning Online. Washington, D.C.: AAUW

      Educational Foundation, 2001.

Kubala, Tom. "Teaching Community College Faculty Members on the Internet." Community

      College Journal of Research and Practice, 24. (2000): 331-339.

Lee, In-sook. "Gender Differences in Self-regulated On-line Learning Strategies Within Korea's

      University Context." Educational Technology Research and Development 50.1 (2002):

      101-11. Online. FirstSearch. Wilson Select Plus. 3 October 2002.

Lezberg, Amy Kirle. "Distance Education can be Dynamic for Women." Women in Higher

      Education. v.6 n.9. (1997): 21-22.

McAllister, Catherine and Evelyn Ting. "Analysis of Discussion Items by Males and Females in Online College Courses." Presented at American Educational Research Association,Seattle, WA, April 2001.

McPherson, Maggie and Nunes, Miguel Baptista. "The failure of a virtual social space (VSS) designed to create a learning community: lessons learned." British Journal of Educational Technology. Vol. 35, Issue 3. (June 2004): 305-322.

"Naomi." Personal Interview. June 10, 2004.

"Ruth." Personal Interview. June 14, 2004.

Savicki, Victor, Ph.D. and Kelley, Merle, Ph.D. "Computer Mediated Communication: Gender and Group Composition." Cyberpsychology and Behavior. Volume 3, Number 5. (2000): 817-826.

Teo, Thompson S.H. and Lim, Vivien K.G. "Gender Differences in Internet Usage and Task Preference." Behavior and Information Technology. Vol. 19, No 4. (2000): 283-295.

Thrush, Emily and Young, Necie. "Hither, Thither and Yon: Process in Putting Courses on the Web." Technical Communication Quarterly. Winter 1999 Vol. 8 No. 1. (49-59)

Tovey, Janice. "Computer Interfaces and Visual Rhetoric: Looking at the Technology." Technical Communication Quarterly 5 (1996): 61-76.

Von Prümmer, Christine. Women and Distance Education: Challenges and Opportunities. London: Routledge/Falmer, 2000.

Wolfe, Joanna. "Gender, Ethnicity, and Classroom Discourse: Communication Patterns of Hispanic and White Students in Networked Classrooms." Written Communication, Vol. 17 No. 4. October 2000. (2000): 491-519.