

THE INFLUENCE OF WOMEN ON DISTANCE EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The impact of distance education on women has been significant. Distance education has been a viable means for helping women reach their educational ambitions. Over the last 40 years distance education has increased the ease of access and control over study time. With geographical and time barriers removed, women in particular were able to add the role of student to their list of responsibilities. Women have defeated educational barriers through educational opportunities presented by distance education. Distance education has had a positive effect on women, the majority of distance education students, but how have women influenced distance education?

The purpose of this qualitative, case study was to examine the research more closely to determine if the majority of distance education students are influencing the distance education phenomenon. This look into the influence of women on distance education is important to higher education because informed knowledge of the influence will provide deeper insight into distance education.

Findings suggested that women have influenced distance education by being significant user and supporters of distance education, by being a rich resource for distance education efforts to improve course content and delivery in order to maintain the continued growth of this instructional method, and by being instrumental in the development of networking opportunities.

Keywords: Women, female students, distance education, and online education.

INTRODUCTION

The impact of distance education on women has been significant. Distance education has been a viable means for helping women in reaching their educational ambitions. The landscape of distance education presents many paths for observing first-hand how online learning can ameliorate geographic and time challenges in the pursuit of an education. While distance education is impacted by such things as society, governmental policy, economy and technology, it provides educational and career promise for women (Azaiza, 2011).

Education in general opens doors, enhances career opportunities, and facilitates feelings of self-esteem and self-reliance (Azaiza, 2011). The educational landscape has specifically allowed women to meet head-on issues relating to the stereotypical roles of women, to act in response to these issues, and to transform their stereotypical positions in society to a role with a more contemporary purpose empowering women.

Women Empowerment, introduced in 1985 at the international women conference in Nairobi, has become a global topic (Krishna, 2013). Education has empowered women. Education is crucial for women who aspire to "take their rightful place in society" (Azaiza, 2011, p. 2). The result of educational achievements globally is the end product of the invention of distance education maintained Azaiza (2011). Women have defeated

educational barriers through educational opportunities presented by distance education. Distance education has consequently had a positive effect on women's sense of self-worth and independence.

Distance education has become a vital resource for continuous learning. It was recognized as a solution for many to bypass location and time barriers that precluded decisions for many to enroll in postsecondary education classes. It was thought that by providing educational options that enabled women and men to easily attend class and study without interfering with work and family obligations college and university enrollments would increase (Cragg, Andrusyszyn, & Fraser, 2005).

During the last 40 years distance education has increased the ease of access and control over study time. With geographical and time barriers removed women in particular were able to add the role of student to their list of responsibilities. Distance education improved the ease of access and control over time to study and minimized today's stress to meet professional obligations and encourage lifelong learning (Cragg, Andrusyszyn, & Fraser, 2005). The "distance open learning system" (Azaiza, 200, p. 2) is not a choice for some women for hope and new opportunity, it is the only option. Distance education has had a positive effect on women (Azaiza, 2011). With the majority of distance education students being mature females (Azaiza, 2011; Kwapong, 2007; National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.; Weatherly, 2011) the question then seems to follow, what influence have women had on distance education, if any? The purpose of this study was to examine the research more closely to determine if the majority of distance education students are influencing the distance education phenomenon. This look into the influence of women on distance education is important to higher education because informed knowledge of the influence will provide deeper insight into distance education. The researcher asked the following two exploratory questions: What happened during the evolution of distance education? What themes emerged over time? Perhaps some definitions are in order before proceeding further. Distance education is defined as "various forms of study at all levels which are not under the continuous, immediate supervision of tutors present with their students in lecture rooms or on the same premises, but which, nevertheless, benefit from the planning, guidance and tuition of a tutorial organization" (as cited in Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006, p. 568). Online education is defined as "instruction through a connection to a computer system at a venue distant from the learner's personal computer" (p. 568). This definition suggests that online education is a method of distance education with benefits for students, instructors, and institutions through educational outreach, increased incomes, and refreshed scholarly attraction in teaching through technology.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

When the stereotypical roles of women are viewed as limited to the obligations of being housewives and mothers, many women find difficulty in establishing harmony between their previous obligations (work, home, and society) with the addition of educational responsibilities.

In other words, taking time away from their families is a challenge for potential students who are wives and mothers (Azaiza, 2011). This is exacerbated by the fact that the majority of distance education students are mature females (Azaiza, 2011; Kwapong, 2007; National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.; Weatherly, 2011). It is not uncommon for women to be unable to attend formal schools (Azaiza, 2011). Distance education has had a positive effect on women, the majority of distance education students, but how have women influenced distance education?

By examining the influence of women on distance education, designers of distance education opportunities can take a more informed look at the challenges women have as

distance education students. Course designers can better serve this segment of the population by further assisting them with minimizing potential barriers to earning an education thereby allowing them to accomplish their educational ambitions with stress-free ease.

METHOD

This was a qualitative study utilizing a case study method. Case study is a suitable method of inquiry for this research study because it attempts to examine one area of concern (what is the influence on distance education) through one case (women) or bounded system (Creswell, 2007). The bounded system of women was selected because the majority of distance education students are mature females (Azaiza, 2011; Kwapong, 2007; National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.; Weatherly, 2011).

Research Design

This study was a single instrumental case study, by a review of the literature, designed to emphasize a detailed contextual analysis of the influence of women on distance education (Creswell, 2007). This examination of the research of the influence of women on distance education was also designed to take the reader into the setting of the early years of distance education with a clarity not provided in a more reportorial account (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

Data Collection and Analysis

In order to gain a clear understanding of the context of the influence of women on the phenomenon of distance education, the goal of the research was to focus on details that might not otherwise be detected or considered. The forms of data collection are regularly interrelated in qualitative research so that researchers comparing the relationship of the techniques to a tree with branches extending from its trunk. In a sense the researcher climbs into the tree to gain a better perspective of the lived experiences (LeCompte, Millroy, & Preissle, 1992).

"Case studies rely on historical and document analysis . . . for data collection (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p.267). This study was limited to the written material available. These data were examined in the research. The information for this study was derived from: peer-reviewed journals, non-peer reviewed journals, books, and online sources. The academic databases used were from the online library of Texas A&M University-Commerce and included, but were not limited to, Academic Search Premier, EBSCO, Education Research Complete, Eric, ProQuest, and Sage Publications. The key descriptive terms used for this research were women, female students, distance education, and online education.

Data analysis included a holistic analysis of the entire case study to identify themes that emerged during the collection process. Naturalistic generalizations were developed from the emerging themes as a result of analyzing the data. These generalizations are implications or suggestions for higher education to apply to a population of cases (Creswell, 2007).

FINDINGS

Distance education has modified who obtains an education, how education might be experienced, who carries out the education, and what the application of education is. An early example of distance education was the Society to Encourage Studies at Home founded by Anna Eliot Ticknor who was the daughter of George Ticknor, a well-known Boston academic and Harvard professor. In 1873 Ticknor established her Society in Boston to offer women a liberal education with a purpose to encourage women to devote time each day for continuous learning.

Ticknor's Society was one of the first correspondence study programs, a distant, tailored method of instruction carried out through the United States mail system. Potential students received information about the program upon request. Once accepted into the Society, female students decided to enroll in English, history, science, French, German, or art. Ticknor engaged affluent, intellectual colleagues to volunteer as teachers who mailed syllabi to the students who then prepared their assignments and submitted "memory notes" (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006, p. 573) to their respective teachers for review. The programs were paced according to the needs of the students, which was a plus for women with household responsibilities and therefore limited time to study. However, distance education was not only altruistic it was furthering respective institutions' pledge toward the education of society.

It is difficult to determine the influence of Ticknor's Society to Encourage Studies at Home. What is known is that the Society enrolled more than seven thousand women even though the Society was not widely publicized. Individual statements, furthermore, indicated how lives were impacted by distance education. Elizabeth Cary Agassiz, an intimate colleague of Ticknor, for example, referred to the Society as the "silent university" (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006, p. 573). She candidly applauded the Society for its intention to modernize women's lives without changing or negatively impacting their responsibilities in the home (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006).

Ticknor's Society could have effortlessly taught home economics and only offer women an education parallel to their responsibilities in the home. Instead, the Society offered women an education in a variety of topics which included ancient and medieval history, zoology, geology and mineralogy, mathematics and astronomy, and German and English literature. The Society to Encourage Studies at Home provided women an opportunity to earn a liberal education beyond the boundaries of the influential universities for women in opposition to society's ideals of the role of women (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006).

Distance education in general has been affected by questions of the quality of education. It is also well accepted that distance education can provide educational opportunities for potentially untapped students. Ticknor's Society specifically demonstrated that quality education can prevail in spite of any perceived restrictions.

In other words, correspondence courses can have a positive effect in the lives of students. As technology alone does not assure a quality education, a quality education is not inevitably harmed by the restrictions of technology. The history of distance education illustrates that questions come to light regarding the value of education when differences occur between face-to-face and distance education faculty. These questions can be expected to occur when distance education faculty efforts get in the way of the more established role of the professorate (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006).

Women's involvement in the workplace, in general, has increased significantly over the past 40 years. As a result, the role of women has greatly expanded. Balancing roles requires significant time, energy, and tradeoffs, ultimately leading to role conflict. However, multiple roles can result in a number of benefits to the physical and psychological well-being of women, as well as negative effects. Balancing work and family is similar to juggling balls of various colors and sizes. Frequently one is unsure how many are in the air, what color or size they are, or which to grasp next. Moreover, any responsibility (marital, occupational, or parental) can become a basis for support or stress. Family and social support, for example, tend to generate high levels of life fulfillment and spousal support is important for managing multiple responsibilities (Cragg, Andruszyn, & Fraser, 2005).

Research regarding support for female students in distance education courses is minimal and out of date. What research there is indicates that even when there is support from family and friends to pursue educational interests, balancing the many responsibilities from home, work, and school still necessitates considerable energy and organization. Because distance education students generally study in the home, family and friends can become great sources of support or huge barriers for continued learning (Cragg, Andrusyszyn, & Fraser, 2005).

According to Cragg, Andrusyszyn, and Fraser (2005), women's lives were transformed by distance education. The lives of those close to students changed to becoming more accustomed to the additional responsibilities assumed by the students. Support from spouses, family, friends, and employers were necessary for student success. However, study time frequently became the students' primary responsibility.

Women felt physical and emotional conflict as students with attempts to harmonize time and energy for multiple responsibilities. Distance education courses appeared invisible to others and therefore difficult to explain. However the benefits of learning and opportunities for attaining professional goals, as a direct result of taking distance education classes, assisted female students with overcoming or handling challenges along the way.

The researchers claimed that images of a woman with a number of responsibilities in enrolled distance education courses frequently produced feelings of stress and guilt. They even experienced the loss of relationships. However, women's contentment with life increased because of their improved sense of worth and professional acknowledgement due to their distance education accomplishments.

Female students enrolled in distance education classes communicated that they wanted better contact with and access to instructors, more opportunities for collaboration with fellow students, greater technological orientation and support, access to quality technology, and available information about courses, clearly outlined course requirements, and distance education programs. Cragg, Andrusyszyn, and Fraser (2005) maintained that distance educators must take into account the needs of students when designing courses with large numbers of women. Sufficient communication is an important aspect for effective distance education courses. Providing sufficient communication to female students will promote success, claimed the researchers.

Marie Forleo, for example, established a multimillion-dollar online tutorial small-business with her Rich Happy & Hot (L.K., 2012, p. 42) program of online tutorials and programs. Forleo's New York City-based business focuses on women to assist them with creating financial and lifestyle independence by establishing their own businesses. Forleo realized she had problems with an eight-week, marketing and online entrepreneurship course. Even though the course received excellent evaluations from female students, she felt that too many asked for refunds. "I wasn't happy" Forleo stated. "Though 20 percent is about normal in the industry, nothing about what we do should be normal" (as cited in L.K., 2012, p. 42). After researching the problem by asking the students to provide her with feedback on the courses, Forleo learned that her female students did not "want to be talked to as if they're not being listened to" (as cited in L. K., 2012, p. 42). Female students need individualized communication throughout the course.

Weatherly (2011) claimed that online female students can be an indispensable source for investigating online learning. These students could be a rich resource for continued development in the area of distance education for the benefit for potential distance education students. Women are realistic students, maintained Weatherly, and might not consider answering questions in writing. As such, qualitative, open-ended interview

questions work best to assist higher education in improving course preparation, student engagement, and designing classes that are student-centered with active learning opportunities.

College and university personal in the position of making decisions regarding distance education must first recognize and respond to online students to “gain momentum in a new age of information” (Weatherly, 2011, p. 10). In addition to paying attention to online students, these decision makers can begin to modify distance educational programs with the needs of these students in mind. Without this attention on these students their educational achievements are threatened. Consequently, as college and university personnel listen to these students and additional research is conducted in this area, distance education is likely to be improved as a result of this effort and the impact of distance education on this segment of the population. For example, by listening to these students, administrators will be able to anticipate the needs of these learners and be prepared for the adult female students’ circumstances that potentially threaten their educational endeavors.

Collins-Brown and Weatherly (2011) introduced the Collaborative Online Resource Environment for Women (Core4Women). This collaboration is a new group of women who are searching for information and women who have experience with online education who can provide information regarding online education.

According to Collins-Brown and Weatherly, Core4Women.org was launched by women who appreciated the benefits of earning an education online.

These same women were female students in a doctoral research project who had been interviewed about their online experiences and who tirelessly inquired about possible opportunities or avenues for uniting together with others experiencing similar challenges with online education.

Information about the tireless inquires were later shared at the International Forum for Women in eLearning Conference in 2007. Weatherly, founder of Core4Women received tremendous support to design a website for women to share online education experiences. Over 30 women studying online participated with the preparation of a proposal that was submitted to the United States Distance Learning Association (USDLA). The executive council of the United States Distance Learning Association commended the initiative on August 31, 2008. Subsequently, the executive council recommended that a free collaborative online website for women be designed to assist women with online educational experiences (Collins-Brown & Weatherly, 2011).

Core4Women is an organization of women and men volunteers who have given time so that women are able to collaborate with one another on their online experiences. As a result of this effort Core4Women submitted an application for 501(c) (3) nonprofit status to the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) in 2010. Once IRS approval is given, Core4Women will be able to apply for grants and provide tax deductible donation status to donors. Core4Women will then be able to award scholarships and to conduct a self-study with the goal of continually enhancing services to women searching for online educational information (Collins-Brown & Weatherly, 2011).

Nix (2011) introduced the International Forum for Women in E-Learning (IFWE) foundation that was established by Darcy Hardy in 2003. IFWE is a women’s conference that is related to the United States Distance Learning Association. The conference was designed to celebrate the progress women have made with distance education and to offer these women a network for collaborating on distance education experiences. The IFWE inspires changes in teaching practices, challenges research concentrations, creates

opportunities, and inspires advancement in distance education. "Thanks to the Internet, the concept of community no longer has geographical limitations" stated Nix. A benefit for many involved in distance education is that there is a significant bond and yearly gatherings are even more eventful because of this bond.

McKnight-Tutein and Thackaberry (2011) suggested that women and men learn differently. The researchers also suggested that hybrid courses are learning environments that support learning in a manner that women can excel.

McKnight-Tutein and Thackaberry introduced four approaches for hybrid learning environments for consideration with an overall objective to enhance online learning settings and assignments that maintain women's educational success in higher education as well as provide men with engaging educational opportunities. The end goal is enhanced academic success for both men and women.

Franklin (2011) recommended tools and technology as educational solutions to assist female students pursuing their online education. With the ongoing distance education changes, achieving feelings of harmony between one's professional and personal life can become challenging.

Online instructors, do not have typical working hours, however, it is possible to meet students' needs without detracting from the needs of instructors' families and friends.

Utilizing Web 2.0 tools assist instructors with working smarter and achieving a sense of balance in relation to their personal responsibilities.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

What has been the impact of women on distance education? The theme of communication continued to emerge throughout data collection and analysis.

- Students of Ticknor's society communicated about how lives were impacted by distance education (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006).
- Elizabeth Cary Agassiz openly communicated the positive effect distance education had on women (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006).
- Family and social support as well as spousal support are forms of communication that are needed for student success (Cragg, Andrusyszyn, & Fraser, 2005).
- Communicating to others the responsibilities of being a student of distance education courses can be difficult to explain (Cragg, Andrusyszyn, & Fraser, 2005).
- Female distance education students reported that they wanted better communication (Cragg, Andrusyszyn, & Fraser, 2005).
- Forleo discovered that her female students needed individualized communication (L. K., 2012).
- As college and university personnel listen to students, distance education is likely to be improved and administrators will be able to anticipate the needs of students for effective course preparation (Weatherly, 2011).
- Collaborative Online Resource Environment for Women (Core4Women) was started by women for the purpose of student collaborations (Collins-Brown & Weatherly, 2011).
- The International Forum for Women in E-Learning (IFWE) foundation that was established for student collaboration (Nix, 2011).

- **Scholarly communication on activities to improve distance education will likely enhance academic success for both men and women (Franklin, 2011; McKnight-Tutein & Thackaberry, 2011).**

The broader theme of communication can be divided into smaller categories of communication:

- **the positive impact of distance education on women,**
- **the need for communicated support**
- **the need for significant and individualized communication with instructors,**
- **the need for communicating with designers of distance education courses regarding course development for enhanced academic success, and**
- **the need for communicating experiences with colleagues**

In summary, findings suggested that women have influenced distance education by being significant users and supporters of distance education, by being a rich resource for distance education efforts to improve course content and delivery in order to maintain the continued growth of this instructional method for the benefit of future students, and by being instrumental in the development of networking opportunities.

IMPLICATIONS

The implications from this study are two-fold. As designers become more informed by listening to distance education students they will be able to anticipate and plan for the needs of these students.

Also, administration will be better prepared to address circumstances that could potentially threaten educational endeavors.

Consequently, as distance education courses become less challenging for these students, student enrollments will continue to increase.

The higher college and university enrollments are the greater the likelihood of future college success, which benefits all.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that this study be replicated to determine if the same results are realized. It is also recommend that longitudinal studies be conducted to determine if there is a trend.

Future studies can be conducted to discover if these same results occur or if the results are impacted by future circumstances.

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