DISTANCE EDUCATION:
A Perspective from Women's Studies

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically explores the links between Women's Studies and distance education and questions whether this style of learning is compatible with feminist pedagogical goals. A review of the literature was conducted, primarily from a US and Canadian perspective, and the following are highlighted as key concerns to feminist educators: gender, technology, curriculum, and pedagogy. Significantly, the research suggests that distance education continually downplays the importance of a gender analysis despite the fact that women make up the majority of distance education users. The research also reveals that feminist teachers are increasingly using their experiences working in distance education to expand upon how, when, and where we teach Women's Studies and that techniques employed within distance education could be usefully applied to in-class learning.

This paper concludes with suggestions of how we might begin to bridge the gap between feminist pedagogy and distance education.

Keywords: Distance education, feminist pedagogy, Women's Studies, gender, technology, Canada.

INTRODUCTION

During my time as a women's studies graduate student, I have had several opportunities to work in the classroom, tutoring undergraduates on feminist theory and praxis. But it has been my work with distance education that has given me pause for reflection. I was first introduced to distance learning when I was employed as a teaching assistant for a first-year women's studies course.

The intellectual and practical benefits gained from this experience notwithstanding, the model of learning suggested by the course structure was one of individualized learning, with little to no contact among students or between tutor and students. I brought to the course a set of expectations and understandings about feminist pedagogy: students would embrace cooperative learning by sharing personal experiences, and they would link those experiences to larger meta-questions about gender equality and social justice.

At the time, I felt that the print-based structure of the course (whereby students worked at their own pace, outside of the physical classroom) seemed very disconnected from feminist pedagogical practices. The 'virtual' structure of the course led me to the conclusion that we feminist educators need to critically assess the relationship between feminism, women's studies, distance education, and the woman student. In so doing, we will have greater insight into the limitations imposed by, and the possibilities presented through, this complex and often contradictory relationship.

My purpose here is to critically review the largely North American literature on feminist pedagogy and distance education within the discipline of women's studies and to suggest

ways to better integrate these two perspectives. Several key questions structure this review.

First, what does the distance education model of learning have to offer feminist pedagogy and, conversely, can distance education be compatible with feminist educational objectives?

Second, what are the feminist concerns regarding distance education?

Finally, why should distance education matter to feminist teachers?

Feminism has transformed the classic model of adult education by challenging hierarchies of knowledge and authority and by tackling issues of gender inequality in the classroom (Maher & Tetreault, 2008). The invisibility or anonymity of students in distance education may therefore seem to contradict principles of feminist pedagogy, which, when utilized by feminist educators, focus on making female students *more* visible, not less; or as some feminist skeptics ask, "Why substitute a simulation when you can have the real thing?" (Schweizer, 2001, p. 204). Inspired by my own experiences facilitating learning in distance education courses, I want to tackle this apparent contradiction. In the distance education that I have been part of, there is little engagement among students, people live at great distances from and do not know one another, and it is difficult to gauge whether the material has any significant impact on the majority of the student body (other than the few who regularly stay in contact). Thus, I too have doubts about the compatibility of feminist pedagogy with the distance education model of learning.

I begin by briefly sketching out the concept and importance of distance education within adult learning. Building on this discussion, I then examine the feminist debate on distance education, focusing on particular concerns about gender, technology, curriculum, and pedagogy. As we will see, feminist educators are still debating each of these issues, and many are using their writing to share their experiences with distance teaching to highlight both the challenges of and possibilities inherent in this model of learning. Through my review, I will show that I am arguing for a feminist model of distance education that not only incorporates the needs of students and feminist educators but also supports student growth and skill development. The model must also be flexible enough to adapt to rapidly changing learning environments brought on by advances in technology. I will conclude by suggesting ways to begin to bridge the gap between feminist pedagogy and distance education.

DISTANCE EDUCATION: Contexts and Models

The purpose of distance education is to make higher education more accessible and flexible for adult learners who would not otherwise be able to continue their education within the traditional classroom setting. Kaye (1989) describes distance education as follows: "Teaching is to a large degree mediated through various technologies and learning generally takes place on an individual basis through supported independent study in the student's home or workplace" (p. 6). The virtual nature of distance education is meant to offer students more control over the pace and context of their learning. Of course, distance education does not come for free, and many critics have argued that the costs, both financial and personal, may be too high for many potential learners (Kaye, 1989; Kramarae, 2003), especially when we consider how quickly learning technologies (i.e., software and programs) change.

Canadian distance education, or learning at a distance, was implemented as early as the late nineteenth century and hearkened back to an earlier era when provisions were made

to educate people across a vast geographical space (Canadian Association of Distance Education, 1999).

The implementation of mail service has also been credited with the rise in correspondence courses offered by Canadian universities in the late nineteenth century. In places where there was no mail service, the North West Mounted Police (now the Royal Canadian Mounted Police) delivered materials to students (Canadian Association of Distance Education, 1999). Even though universities such as Queen's University and the University of British Columbia offered correspondence courses by the early twentieth century, distance education did not really prosper in Canada until the 1960s. It was during this period of growth, from the 1960s to the mid-1970s, that a number of postsecondary institutions across Canada (e.g., Simon Fraser University and Memorial University) began offering a limited number of distance education courses. During the 1980s a number of universities (e.g., McGill University) developed whole programs dedicated to distance education (Canadian Association of Distance Education, 1999).

Today, most public Canadian universities offer a variety of distance education courses (referred to as bimodal), and some institutions -for instance, Alberta's Athabasca University and the former Open University Consortium of British Columbia, now called Thompson Rivers University- are completely devoted to adult distance education (referred to as unimodal). Distance education courses are offered for many kinds of degrees and programs and serve multiple purposes, from professional upgrading and undergraduate survey courses to graduate studies. Anita Clair Fellman created the first two women's studies distance education courses at Simon Fraser University in the 1980s (Sturrock, 1988).

Since the late twentieth century, distance education has undergone changes brought about by rapidly occurring technological advancements and evolving student needs. The generational model of distance education is particularly useful for exploring these changes and will help illuminate my discussion of feminist pedagogy and distance education in women's studies. Using a generational model, education researcher Nipper (1989) has shown how distance education has gone through three major historical shifts.

The first generation, called correspondence teaching, relied solely on printed material. The traditional student-teacher hierarchy remained intact, and student feedback was slow. Nipper suggests that many Western postsecondary institutions premised their early distance education courses on this model. Canada's early distance education model conformed closely to this structure and, thus, can be interpreted as part of this first generation.

The second generation, referred to as multimedia distance education, developed in the late 1960s. This model relies on a mix of print and broadcast media, as well as on some teleconferencing combined with face-to-face interaction between teacher and student. Canada's own boom in distance education in the late 1960s can be attributed to the integration of these emerging technological developments, especially given that the country's postsecondary institutions had to ready themselves for the influx of students that would accompany the postwar population explosion. Overall, the objective of both the first and second generations was the distribution of materials to learners.

In both generations, learners have little contact with instructors and little to no contact with other learners. Nipper (1989) points out that the first- and second-generation delivery modes are often criticized because they are constructed to favour those who are already educated and ignore the social processes involved in learning. This last point has certainly been taken up by feminist educators. They call for, and adopt, teaching techniques that view the student as an active participant in the creation of knowledge

who is responsible for his or her own learning. The student is not simply a passive receiver of education.

The third generation -made possible largely by the development of web communications technologies in the late twentieth century (email, chat rooms, and technologies designed specifically for online learning such as WebCT and First Class)- addresses these issues by prioritizing communication between students and teachers and among students. This model is also defined by its use of group work, more flexible curricula, and the narrowing of the social distance between students and teachers (Nipper, 1989). As noted in a report by the Canadian Association of Distance Education (CADE) (1999), distance education facilitators have always made use of all available technology. Nevertheless, it is also important to recognize that integrating computer-mediated communications (CMCs) into distance education is not supposed to replace more traditional models of communication. Rather, CMCs should complement and expand on existing frameworks and models (Kaye, 1989). Specialists such as Kaye (1989) argue that this will give students the best learning experience possible. Ultimately, though, the use of CMCs will depend on academic disciplines and pedagogical needs (Kaye, 1989). Indeed, the use of CMCs in distance education courses for the discipline of women's studies is still being debated and explored.

WOMEN'S STUDIES GOES THE DISTANCE: Debating Distance Education

Feminists have always been concerned with women's access to education and the conditions under which their education occurs (e.g., teaching practices and student-teacher relations). Certainly, there is a long history of women in the West, even pre-first-wave feminists, who argued for women's right to a formal education on par with what men received (e.g., Mary Wollstonecraft in the eighteenth century). The later mass-mobilized movement of first-wave feminism from the mid-nineteenth century to the First World War fought for women's access to postsecondary education in various (male-dominated) disciplines. The second-wave feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s continued to debate education issues, especially by focusing on the development of curricula, courses, and programs that focused on making visible women's history and experiences. Indeed, feminist educators have long noted that so-called gender-neutral education models tend to be a code for androcentric and Western ways of knowing, an observation that appears to be borne out in distance education literature, the bulk of which is not concerned with gender issues (Raddon, 2007), let alone with the specific concerns and needs of women students.

In this sense, although discussions about CMCs and generations of distance education are no doubt important, the specific needs and experiences of women are rarely acknowledged in them. In the case of distance education, gender must take centre stage as an important category worthy of scholarly inquiry.
It is imperative that feminist teachers continue to contest this oversight through their dedication to research and change. Feminist pedagogy is generally concerned with knowledge construction, power relationships, the assertion that the personal is political, the relationship between theory and practice, and a critique of traditional approaches (Tisdell, 2000; Nawratil, 1999). Because feminist pedagogies are informed by a variety of critical theories, from postmodernism to psychology, there is no single definition of feminist pedagogy (Tisdell, 2000; Nawratil, 1999).

In terms of practice, the feminist or women's studies classroom has typically been viewed as a somewhat safe, albeit highly contested, space in which women (and men) can engage in vibrant intellectual exchanges and draw on personal experience to inspire debate and growth. But the notion of safe space in the women's studies classroom, much like the consciousness-raising groups of second-wave feminism, has been vociferously

challenged by lesbians and women of colour, who argue that such spaces often reproduce hierarchies of inequality and invisibility by privileging the experiences of white, middle-class, heterosexual, and able-bodied students and instructors and, thus, further marginalize the voices of women who fall outside the hetero-normative gender script (Maher & Tetreault, 2008).

This highlights the ways in which feminist pedagogy debates are often constrained by their discussion of physical space(s), resulting in fewer discussions and explorations of feminist teaching practices that occur in non-traditional (i.e., virtual) settings. Feminist distance educators such as Briggs and McBride (2005) and Nawratil (1999) have noted this exclusion, and the literature on distance education courses in women's studies reveals the frustrating limitations of incorporating traditional feminist pedagogies into the distance education model (Smith & Norlen, 1994; Cronan Rose, 1995; Hopkins, 1999; Whitehouse, 2002).

More recent studies on feminist pedagogy within the physical classroom, however, do raise important questions about the possibility of carrying out traditional feminist pedagogical practices within the (masculinist) institutional space of the university. Feminist educators, whether teaching online or in the classroom, face institutional barriers in their choice of teaching practices; for instance, they are constrained by class size, location, and the availability of technology, all of which aid in the construction of teacher-student relations, particularly assumptions about the student's subject position (Webber, 2006).

However, these limitations have not stifled or silenced feminist educators; the classroom, both as a physical place and space, has become yet another site for critical reflection, activism, and resistance. Indeed, students in the feminist or women's studies classroom are given the opportunity to think as critically about their learning environments (Oberhauser, 2008) as they do about other aspects of their everyday lives.

The feminist literature on distance education reveals the myriad ways feminists are teaching women (and men): teleconferencing via some form of media technology, with the possibility of some face-to-face interaction (Spronk & Radtke, 1988; Burge & Lenksyj, 1990; Leiper, 1994; Smith & Norlen, 1994; Cronan Rose, 1995; Hopkins, 1999); a combination of in-class and online learning (Guymer, 1999; Schweitzer, 2001; Allahyaii, 2002; Whitehouse, 2002; Marchbank, 2007; Maher & Hoon, 2008) and entirely web-based learning (Joseph, 1999). These pedagogical techniques are not exclusive to the women's studies classroom, but they are unique in that they offer female students' alternative learning sites that encourage them to be active learners, for distance education tends to be more student-centred (Joseph, 1999). These various techniques have also been used to help overcome some of the exclusionary practices and problems attached to the physical classroom discussed above. For instance, distance courses can transcend geographical borders, bringing together female students from all over the world and providing them with the opportunity to share their experiences and knowledge with a diverse group of women (Joseph, 1999). The ability of distance education to cross all kinds of borders (e.g., provincial or national) creates a forum for feminist teaching and learning that challenges the aforementioned narrow focus on the experiences of white, middle-class, heterosexual, and able-bodied women. Other feminist educators have found that the online classroom may also level the playing field, if you will, for "students who usually emerge as 'natural' leaders in face-to-face discussions cannot dominate the asynchronous discussions any more than the shy or timid student can dominate the face-to-face discussions" (Whitehouse, 2002, p. 219).

Of course, the degree of technological sophistication within any learning environment depends on many factors, such as the instructor's level of knowledge and comfort,

institutional support and financing, and the development and accessibility of new(er) learner-based technologies. Despite these kinds of differences, the main issue most feminist distance educators raise again and again is the lack of research on the gendered aspects of distance education (Burge & Lenksyj, 1990; May, 1994; Hanson et al., 2004; Johnson, 1999; Briggs & McBride, 2005; Raddon, 2007). I identify two subfields emerging from this larger concern with gender: gender and technology and women's needs as distance education students.

GENDER AND TECHNOLOGY

The role of technology in education is far from neutral. For many feminist educators, the use of computer technology to facilitate learning is fraught with contradictions: it can be both empowering and problematic for female users. In particular, some feminist critics, employing gender socialization theories, argue that women learn differently from men (i.e., their communication preferences differ) and therefore require technological approaches that facilitate a learning style sensitive to their specific needs (Joseph, 1999; Hanson et al., 2004). Although this is an important factor in determining women's needs as distance students, I contend that it is just as important to build women's comfort and confidence to a level where they feel competent using any software, regardless of whether it addresses feminine modes of communication.

Clearly, there is a growing body of academic literature, as well as governmental reports, suggesting that the gender technology gap is rapidly decreasing. A recent report released by Statistics Canada (based on a 2003 survey) found that two-thirds of Canadian women use the Internet on a regular basis (Lindsay & Almey, 2006). Younger women between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four are on par with their male peers, especially when it comes to email-use which remains consistent until their mid-forties (Lindsay & Almey, 2006). The gender gap does appear to increase after age sixty-five, when women's Internet use drops off significantly. Scholarly research on women and girl gamers also suggests that women are becoming equal participants within cyberspace.[1] Therefore, rather than reinforcing or propping up essentialist arguments that would restrict women to particular kinds of technology, I prefer to focus on strategies for increasing women's use of technology, which they can then fashion to their own needs and desires.

For some feminist educators, part of the problem can be resolved by partially integrating learning technologies into the curriculum, for this will aid in the development of women's skill building and confidence. In their article, "Distance Education: A Manifesto for Women's Studies," Briggs and McBride (2005) support this approach, arguing for the integration of technology not only as a tool for the dissemination of information but also as a way to incorporate skill building within curricula (e.g., teaching women how to make a webpage). Not only do women students then leave the course or program with tools for critical thinking, they also acquire very practical skills that are transferable to the workplace. Briggs and McBride make it clear that learning how to use the technology is not sufficient: once women have acquired the requisite skills, they must be encouraged to make use of these technologies to liberate themselves through, for instance, the development of women-centred websites. Thus, if women seem hesitant or lack the confidence to take on these kinds of technology successfully, then we, as feminist teachers, should do what we can to facilitate – to make it happen – by offering consistent support and feedback.

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[1] For more on this topic, see J. Davies. (2004, March). Negotiating Femininities Online. *Gender and Education*, 16(1), 35-49; Y. Kafai, C. Heeter, J. Denner, & J.Y. Sun (Eds.). (2008). *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New Perspectives on Gender and Gaming*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Along the same lines, Whitehouse (2002), in her article, "Women's Studies Online: An Oxymoron?" reflects on her experience(s) teaching women's studies in what is referred to as a distributed learning environment; in other words, she incorporated both online and in-class learning. In Whitehouse's class, an online course component is instrumental from the start. Students are asked to contribute to a who's who page, where they can report on their progress throughout the course (Whitehouse, 2002). Again, we find a feminist educator who is committed to both critical reflection and computer skill building: students learn how to construct a simple webpage about themselves as they create a space where they can reflect on what they have learned and how it may relate to their own experience. As Whitehouse (2002) writes, "The Who's Who page allows students to extend the notion of the self beyond the first face-to-face impression and to change and grow as they explore new territories of thought and learn to challenge the status quo" (p. 218).

This is an example of how integrating technology into the curriculum can encourage a different, albeit complementary, kind of theoretical work than is done in a traditional classroom, work that is inherently feminist in its attention to shifting positionalities and collaborative learning and knowledge production within a virtual environment. The success of Whitehouse's who's who page suggests that women *do* want to claim spaces of their own on the Internet. They simply need to be given the resources and an outlet to experiment and, thus, challenge the perception that women are easily discouraged and unmotivated when it comes to learning new programs. Whitehouse, drawing on her personal experiences working in the field, offers feminist educators different options that blur the lines between virtual and physical classrooms.

Technologies such as the Internet may also bridge the gap between feminist educators and students, transcend geographical borders and physical locations, and result in new opportunities for feminist networking and political organizing. Indeed, educators such as Allahyaii (2002) are using the Internet to encourage feminist cyberactivism. Allahyaii developed a project that required her students to complete work placements with various feminist organizations. Throughout the semester, students submitted and uploaded their field notes onto the Internet in a process that Allahyaii refers to as cyber-ethnography. Reflecting on her experience using cyberspace as a tool for feminist coalition building, Allahyaii comes to the conclusion that her students left the course armed with valuable technological skills and insight into the relationship between cyberspace and women's political organizing or the social relation between the online and offline worlds.

Indeed, cyberspace has come to play an important and even necessary role in feminist organizing and networking, to which the ever growing list of online feminist websites can attest; for instance, the third-wave feminist site *grrrlzines.net* contains a detailed list of various grassroots and mainstream feminist and women's groups from around the globe. Again, we see how combining feminist teaching practices with new technologies not only inspires the facilitation of feminist theory and learning but also upholds both feminist praxis ideals and a long-standing commitment to coalition building between feminism in academia and the broader community. These examples suggest that cyberspace is altering how we as feminist educators approach teaching our students key concepts and theories in women's studies and suggest that distance learning and feminist pedagogy, when combined, have the potential to empower our students in ways that will stick with them well beyond the end of the semester or graduation.

Debates about gender and technology are not limited to questions about curriculum or course design in distance teaching, for feminist educators have raised the stakes of the debate to consider more foundational problems. For instance, in their study on gender and online learning, Hanson, Flansberg, and Castano (2004), found that cyberspace is far from gender neutral and may, in fact, simply mask problems of difference. Based on their

research findings, they concluded that many men replicate real-life behavioural traits associated with stereotypical masculinity (e.g., rough and impersonal), whereas women reinforce behaviour attributed to femininity (e.g., cooperation rather than competition). Their findings suggest that students tend to utilize CMCs in a manner that more often conforms to, rather than challenges, gender norms and expectations (Hanson et al., 2004). Hanson et al. argue that much more research needs to be done on online learning environments to ensure that women, as the major targets for CMC-based education (for reasons that I will address in the next section), are getting what they need. These issues also lead to questions and concerns about the ways the hidden curriculum is functioning in online learning; for instance, is it reinforcing gender, class, and racial stereotypes (Klebesadel, 2004)?[2] Clearly, feminist educators have much to offer in terms of a gendered analysis of technology, especially as it comes to play a more prominent role in the creation and delivery of distance education and serves to maintain gendered differences in learning styles.

There is a lot we can learn from the diverse ways in which feminist teachers are using technologies, both in the traditional classroom setting and in entirely web-based or distance learning. For instance, the way we teach or educate our students about feminism may have to be altered, depending on whether it is done through face-to-face interaction or, say, online chatting (referred to as synchronous or 'in real time' learning) or blogging (referred to as asynchronous learning, considered more flexible and 'convenient' for the student).

As Johnson (2004) suggests, "Distance Ed programs often employ traditional pedagogical frameworks rather than developing alternative instructional models that may be more effective for distance education courses" (para. 2). Finally, any discussion of technology also entails a discussion about its economic costs, not just personal ones, especially when women, who are the main audience for distance education, tend to be overrepresented in the lower rungs of the socio-economic realm (Nawratil, 1999). Indeed, technology is but one of many issues and concerns for female distance students.

STUDENT NEEDS

Although the role of technology in learning is of critical importance to feminist educators, another overarching concern for distance educators is the lack of attention paid to the specific needs of female students, particularly in the form of institutional and familial support. The numbers of Canadian women attending university and colleges has increased significantly in the past thirty years, and women are now well represented at all levels of postsecondary education (i.e., undergrad and graduate programs). This trend continues within distance education: women are currently the fastest-growing sector of online distance education users (Johnson, 2004). However, women have always been highly represented within distance education courses and programs, both in Canada and the United States. Scholars have also shown that women's enrollment in virtual faculties is expanding globally (Marković & Marković, 2007). According to the largest facilitator of distance education and online learning in Canada, Athabasca University, sixty-seven percent of the student population are female ("Our Students", para. 3).

Research sponsored by Statistics Canada details this trend further in its comparative analysis of distance and non-distance students. It concluded that the average distance education student is likely to be a young, unmarried female who lives in rural areas outside of central Canada and holds a lower socio-economic and professional status than

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[2] According to the *Encyclopedia of Feminist Theories,* 'hidden curriculum' refers to "the learned, although not openly intended, outcomes or byproducts of schools or nonschool settings," and these learned outcomes may consist of "worldviews, character traits, cognitive states, emotions, attitudes, values" (Martin, 2000, 247). With regard to feminist educators, much attention on the hidden curriculum has centred on the androcentric and sexist structure and content of education for young girls and women.

students who are not in distance education programs (Burke, 1998). Yet, as Kramarae (2003) points out, "Women in online learning have the paradoxical experience of being simultaneously invisible – even while they are the core constituency of distance learning" (p. 270). So how, as feminist educators, should we respond to the needs of our female students?

We should first consider the communication needs of our female students. Do they differ from male students? There is some (albeit conflicting) evidence to suggest that men and women often exhibit preferences or predispositions towards particular learning and communication styles. Some feminist researchers have suggested, for example, that female students prefer email to the telephone as their main mode of tutor contact (Cragg, Andrusyszyn, & Fraser, 2005). The dizzying amount of student emails received by the new Tutor Marker for the distance education course that I am currently supervising substantiates this suggestion.

The researchers also found, based on their survey results, that the student-tutor relationship was very important to female students, as was interaction with other students, along with support and orientation for technology and well-working equipment (Cragg et al., 2005). Although there are some obstacles preventing the full and proper implementation of, say, well-working equipment (many women's studies programs do not have the budget to finance such things), instructors may be able to find other ways to address these needs, such as initiating contact with students and checking in regularly to monitor their progress.

Another important student need is linked to diversity within the curriculum as well as within the student body. Due to the virtual nature of distance education, and based upon my own experiences, instructors should anticipate a broad mixture of students, some of whom may be studying in another region or even another country. Moreover, the students may be completely new to the discipline of women's studies, which may leave them feeling frustrated with, and isolated from, the class. Cultures may clash as well, especially if the student is unfamiliar with the expectations associated with the course and the institution. As May (1994) revealed in her study of nine distance education students in Women's Studies at Athabasca University, there can be regrettable consequences for both students and teachers when cultural sensitivity as a pedagogical issue is overlooked or underestimated. Based on in-depth, personal interviews, May found that one student, a Canadian Aboriginal woman, dropped the course because her cultural upbringing conflicted with the feminist praxis of critical thinking. When May inquired into the matter, she found that the young woman had been taught that to be overly critical was disrespectful and inappropriate.

Although knowing this in advance may not have prevented this conflict from happening, having students prepare a writing assignment at the beginning of the course asking them to explore their personal histories and how they relate to the course could have been one way to access this information, thereby enabling the instructor to make adjustments or to speak specifically to these differences. Moreover, as Spronk and Radtke (1988) have noted, Aboriginal women may have specific needs that standard distance education programs may not be properly equipped to deal with. Some of these concerns can be addressed at the level of course design, while larger problems such as those related to cost, delivery mode(s), and academic requirements may exacerbate accessibility issues for women of lower socio-economic status or marginalized culture groups. As feminist educators, we do not want to further marginalize women who already face barriers to their learning; therefore, some of these aforementioned issues must be dealt with at the institutional level, not just the department level.

One particular challenge faced by many women students of distance education is time management and multitasking. At any given moment, women are performing any number of roles -mother, wife-partner, employee, and so on.

Cragg, Andrusyszyn, and Fraser (2005) found that the mean number of roles fulfilled by women while studying was six. This suggests that women are often constrained by when, how, and where their learning takes place. For better or worse, women's mobility issues have therefore, made them an attractive target for online courses, helping to create a niche market of distance learners, while overlooking the structural inequalities that create these constraints in the first place.

Kramarae (2003) has suggested that rather than simply providing solutions for female learners at the micro level, much work needs to be done at the macro level, such as providing students with accessible and affordable daycare, which would give women the option of attending traditional classes, distance education, or a combination of both.

Gendered assumptions about the concept of time are built into distance education: in-class (public) time is constructed according to a linear understanding of time (masculine), while a more feminine model that values process and multitasking is embedded within the (privatized) distance education model (Kramarae, 2005).
Moreover, we need to consider how men and women experience the public and private realms as gendered spaces. Raddon (2007) discovered in her study of distance education students in the United Kingdom that men and women approach their studies in very different ways, depending on their gender perceptions and gender roles within and outside the home -that is, women are still primarily responsible for domestic work, which gives men more flexibility to pursue their studies.

As Moss (2004) notes, women's "personal space and time for higher education has to be carved from space and time for other things and from space and time that is often in the control of other people" (p. 299). Therefore, we need to pay attention to the contexts of women's learning, namely, when and where are they doing their studies? How do their daily routines, family responsibilities, and socio-economic status position them as distance learners? These are the kinds of questions we need to consider; otherwise distance education becomes part of the problem, one that contributes to women's social inequalities by perpetuating women's roles as primarily wives and mothers relegated to the domestic sphere. Therefore, some critics have posited that distance education should be viewed as a temporary fix rather than the solution to women's educational challenges and struggles. Distance education should not prevent women from returning to land classes (Guymer, 1999) if they so desire.

All of this indicates that feminist educators should pay attention to the questions of diversity and difference, time management, and curriculum within the context of their students' busy and fragmented lives. Have we been sensitive to needs that are based on cultural, lifestyle, and financial differences? Of course, educators cannot be held solely responsible for all of these types of concerns, but we can make a concerted effort to help ameliorate some of them.

CONCLUSION

I have reviewed some of the literature on feminism and distance learning, paying particular attention to the role of distance education within the discipline of women's studies. I have highlighted some of the important insights and contributions of this work to show that, ultimately, distance education has much to offer more traditional feminist pedagogy frameworks, which tend to use the physical classroom as their point of reflection. The goal of my review was to shed light on some problems that might

otherwise remain unexplored within the traditional women's studies classroom, such as technology-driven learning. Yet, I have by no means exhausted all topics, such as other specific needs-based issues, as well as cultural sensitivity.

Based on this critical review, I conclude that there are three main issues that practitioners of feminist pedagogy need to contend with when they work in a distance education setting. First, we need to recontextualize our conception of feminist pedagogy to include the virtual classroom. As noted in the research discussed in this paper, gender, race, and class inequalities are reproduced in many online learning environments. Educators need to be aware of and monitor this trend constantly. Second, with women constituting a large percentage of students in distance education courses and programs (and growing globally), feminist research and pedagogical practices will provide necessary and much needed strategies and frameworks to ensure that policies and practices take into consideration the special needs of women across diverse ethnic, cultural, class, and educational backgrounds. Of course, the support and cooperation of university administrators is a crucial ingredient if changes are to be made for the long term.

Finally, although there has been much debate amongst feminists regarding the increasing use, reliance, and visibility of computer-mediated learning, and although many of these arguments contribute valid insights, ultimately it is the women who use these technologies who should have the final say in their implementation and use. Constant feedback from female students will be a necessary element in the growth and creation of future feminist distance education research and development. Their feedback will ensure that this work stays firmly grounded within the everyday practices and experiences of female adult learners. Clearly, as the creative and insightful literature has shown in this essay, feminist educators are up to the challenge, proving that the advancement of women in distance education is not just a question of pedagogy — it is one of equality and social justice.

As for the tools of our trade, it seems vitally important for us to stay on top of technological changes in adult learning because they expand our educational options and remind us not to become complacent with our pedagogical practices. Indeed, teaching women's studies within a distance education model offers insight and challenges about how we do, teach, and learn feminism. Finally, it is imperative that feminist scholars continue to research and debate distance education for the benefit of both the discipline and the broader study of distance education.

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