TELE-DISTANCE EDUCATION IN WOMEN'S STUDIES: ISSUES FOR FEMINIST PEDAGOGY[1]

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Abstract

Despite distance education's long history in Canada, Women's Studies courses taught in this mode are a fairly recent phenomena. This article explores the pedagogical and administrative issues which arise when trying to team-teach Women's Studies through distance education, as well as the experiential components of this process. The links between these issues and the context within which they are occurring are also addressed. The case study the authors report on follows, from beginning to end, the intersecting challenges of planning and implementing a feminist pedagogy, through an audio mode of instruction, during the first tele-conferenced "Introduction to Women's Studies" course offered in the Ottawa area.

Résumé

Malgré l'histoire prolongée de la formation à distance au Canada, l'enseignement des cours des "Etudes de femmes" dans cette manière est un phénomène récent. Cet article traitera des questions pédagogiques et administratives, qui se présentent grace aux tentatives d'enseignement de l'équipe de formation à distance, ainsi que le processus composé d'expérience. Les liens entre ces questions et le contexte dans lequel ils se produisent seront aussi traités. L'étude de cas qui est rapportée par les auteurs suivra du debut à la fin les défis entrecroisés de la planification et l'exécution de la pédagogie feministe enseignée de façon audiologique, qui se sont présentés au cours de la première téléconference "Introduction to Women's Studies" offert dans la region d'Ottawa.

Introduction

In her 1938 book, *Three Guineas*, English feminist Virginia Woolf asserted the validity of a woman's perception of the world, and argued that women's access to education was essential for economic independence and intellectual autonomy (Burge, 1988). Forty years later, Dorothy Smith articulated the problem as follows:
...women have been largely excluded from the work of producing the forms of thought and the images and symbols in which thought is expressed and ordered. We can imagine women's exclusion organized by the formation of a

[2] Just as the Women's Studies course we taught was a team effort, this article is a collaborative venture—the order of names does not indicate senior or junior authorship.

circle among men who attend to and treat as significant only what men say. The circle of men whose writing and talk was significant to each other extends backward as far as our records reach. What men were doing was relevant to men, was written by men about men for men. Men listened and listen to what one another said. (1978, p. 282)

Over the years, Woolf's assertions have been reflected in the actions of those who use feminist pedagogy to challenge this "circle effect." As both a product of earlier struggles and as part of contemporary initiatives, Women's Studies is fundamentally concerned with revamping the educational enterprise by "finding new words and creating new methods" (Woolf, 1986, p. 164).

Distance education within either Women's Studies or from a feminist perspective has just begun to be explored. A review of the literature revealed only one anthology in the area (Faith, 1988), as well as a handful of articles (e.g., Burge & Lenskyj, 1990; Smith, 1992) and a special issue on women by the Canadian *Journal of Distance Education* (Spronk, 1990). We are aware of only one edited Canadian collection about the policies and practices of postsecondary distance education in which there is any attempt to develop a feminist or woman-centered understanding of distance learning (Coulter, 1989). Clearly, there is a need to report on women's experiences as learners and educators in distance education, and to develop strong links between theory and practice relating to the design of adult learning for women. This need is reinforced by women's proportionately higher enrolment in distance learning (Burge & Lenskyj, 1990).

In our initial experience as distance educators, we interpreted distance in its literal sense, as a spatial separation between instructor and student. It was only during our tele-conferenced course that we became vividly aware of symbolic distances based on knowledge, experience, class, race/ethnicity, and other axes of differentiation, and a distance based on the power differential between instructor and student. Feminist pedagogy, in its "re-imaging" of the classroom and of education, has as one of its ideals the crossing of both geographic and symbolic distances.[3] Evaluating whether we were able to "cross the distance" between ourselves and our students involved assessing the distance between our ideal feminist classroom and our feminist pedagogy in practice.

Our experience as team-teachers of the first tele-conferenced Women's Studies course offered by the University of Ottawa will be used as a case study. Given that feminism is not a unified ideology or practice, that distance educators are strikingly varied in terms of their social and cultural backgrounds, and that distance education settings and technologies are tremendously variable, universal prescriptions for appropriate pedagogies or technologies in distance education are not our goal. Instead, we wish to contribute to the literature by exploring some of the unique challenges that arose when trying to implement a feminist pedagogy from a distance.

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[3]   "Re-imaging" is a term developed by Shrewsbury (1987) to denote the feminist revisioning of education.

Too often...the new popularity of distance education is based on less than thorough analyses of the sorts of challenges faced on a daily basis by its practitioners. (Paul, 1989, p. 1)

Then and Now

Distance education can be interpreted broadly as teaching at a distance. It often tends to be defined more in terms of what it is not than what it is. Distance education seldom involves face-to-face classroom instruction; it always involves the use of either print, audio, video, or interactive components. While much of distance education remains print-based only, it can also be supplemented with audio or other means. Interaction may be via television, tele-conferencing, mail, fax, E-mail, or may even include one-on-one telephone interaction between learner and teacher.[4]

The multiple technologies used in this mode of education are but one of the contributors to the conceptual confusion in the literature. Others include: (a) various terms that are subsumed within distance education though not synonymous with it (e.g., extension education, continuing education, lifelong learning); (b) different suppliers of distance education (e.g., universities and colleges, business and industry, and proprietary schools); (c) variations in the target client; (d) differences in the policies and practices of distance education and their theoretical and pedagogical underpinnings; and (e) differences over time and between places, from the regional to the international level. Though consensus has yet to be achieved in defining distance education, the common denominators today include: the separation of teacher and learner and the replacement of interpersonal communication with a technological medium, both of which are influenced by their institutional context.[5]

In 1938, the same year that *Three Guineas* was published, British Columbia hosted the first international meeting of distance educators, the International Council for Distance Education (ICDE).[6] This unprecedented coming together from around the globe followed upon more than five decades of "out-of-school" learning in Canada.

It was only natural—and to be expected—that as the large number of immigrants came to Canada...they would bring with them a knowledge of certain educational programs and institutions with which they had been familiar in their former homes. (Selman & Dampier, 1991, p. 36)

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[4] We wish to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for bringing these various interactive modes to our attention.

[5] For further information on definitions and debates concerning distance education, see the Canadian Association for University Continuing Education (CAUCE), 1991; Canadian Studies Directorate, 1989; Keegan, 1990; Nunan, 1993; and Rumble & Harry, 1982.

[6] In 1938 the ICDE was the International Council for Correspondence Education (ICCE), but in 1982, partly at the behest of the newly formed ICCE's Women's International Network (WIN), the name was changed to the International Council for Distance Education. The renaming was a reflection of both the expansion of this field and the development of new, innovative methods by distance educators (Faith, 1988).

For example, those from Great Britain established the first Mechanics' Institutes in the early 1830s in order to provide technical information to skilled workers or "mechanics" (Corbett, 1950). In 1853 British immigrants established a YMCA in Toronto to offer evening classes and other educational activities (Selman & Dampier, 1991). As the availability of educational forums increased in urban centres, distance education became the way to reach the country's population which was widely dispersed over a large geographic area.

Canada's agrarian economy in the nineteenth century meant that distance education had a pioneer history rooted first in the provision of agricultural training. "The Grange (the first in 1872), Farmers' Institutes (the first in 1894) and other agricultural societies flourished" (Selman & Dampier, 1991, p. 65). In 1897 Adelaide Hoodless founded the first Women's Institute, as a counterpart to organizations established by men for men, dedicated to the extension of home economics education from the city to rural areas (Chapman, 1950). Rural women also relied on homestudy to educate their children. Correspondence education often depended upon the labour of wives and mothers to supervise and teach, to receive and dispatch correspondence materials, to oversee students, to create lesson plans, and to monitor students' progress (Faith, 1988).

A second focus of Canadian distance education in the late 1800s addressed the literacy needs of increasing numbers of immigrant labourers (Blackburn & Flaherty, 1994).

From the modest early objective of bringing a civilizing presence to the rough railroad, lumbering and mining camps through the provision of suitable literature in rustic reading rooms, Frontier College [established in 1899 as the Canadian Reading Camp Movement] soon evolved a more ambitious goal of bringing education to the labourers. (Selman & Dampier, 1991, p. 135)

Building upon its scattered and informal beginnings under mainly private and voluntary sponsorship, distance education also became incorporated within the formal education sector. In 1889, 22 years after Confederation, Queen's University was the first Canadian and North American university to begin credit correspondence courses through its newly created extension education department (Helm, 1989). Other provinces were soon to follow suit: for example, British Columbia in 1919, Alberta in 1923, Saskatchewan in 1925 and Manitoba in 1927 (Burge, Wilson, & Mehler, 1984). At the same time, provincial ministries of education developed primary and secondary correspondence education for children unable to attend school (Canadian Studies Directorate, 1989). This has expanded to the point at which more than a quarter of a million children, adolescents and adults are currently registered in programs offered by provincial ministries of education through their correspondence branches (Canadian Studies Directorate, 1989).

In the post World War II period, Canadian universities began offering more and more off-campus credit programming (Canadian Studies Directorate, 1989). Until the 1970s, traditional institutions were the major providers of this education. During this decade, three institutions dedicated to the delivery of distance education were created: Athabasca University in Alberta, the Open Learning Institute in British Columbia,

and Télé-université in Quebec (Burge et al., 1984). Community colleges have also played a prominent role in the provision of distance education including, for example, North Island College (BC), Seneca College (ON), and Holland College (PEI). Today, students in any province or territory can enrol in distance education courses and even earn a degree or certificate from a post-secondary institution.

The history of Women's Studies within distance education is much shorter. For example, the first such course offered by Athabasca University in Edmonton, Alberta, was in 1985 even though this institute was established in 1972 (Bray, 1988; Burge et al., 1984). Although the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) began using audio conferencing in 1982, it was not until January of 1989 that they first offered a graduate course in Women's Studies through a distance mode (Burge & Lenskyj, 1990). In terms of our case study, the University of Ottawa initiated tele-conferenced teaching in 1981 through its Department of Continuing Education. It took twelve years, however, before a Women's Studies course was offered in the fall of 1993.

The above chronology of distance education indicates that its origins are older than the nation itself. As Burge (1990) notes, formal distance education has a 150 year old history. Since its pioneer roots, distance education has evolved continually in response to a shift from an agrarian to a service based economy, to the development of technological innovations, and to the changing needs of a dramatically altering population. Part of the reason for the explosion of interest and participation in distance education is its suitability for extending accessibility, its economic feasibility and its value for social development. These characteristics, which have been at the core of distance education since its inception, have particular relevance to women.

When attempting to compose a record of women's participation in distance education, we are faced with the problem of a "generic" student. Until recently, data on enrolment, graduation, field of study, etc., have failed to take gender into account. While descriptions of distance programs and procedures abound, and research into distance teaching and learning processes is growing rapidly, little comprehensive data is available concerning users. After completing a thorough search for statistics on numbers and types of users, we uncovered only scattered sources on participation rates in select institutes' distance programs or broad references to the typical female weighting in most distance education programs.

In overall university and college enrolment, women have constituted the largest proportion of learners (57-59%) since the early 1980s (Statistics Canada, 1994). Often quoted cross-Canada surveys, like that of Devereaux (1985) reporting on adult learners in both the formal and informal sectors, state that the majority of adult students (age 17 and over) and mature learners (age 25 and above) are women. With reference to distance education students, Burge and Lenskyj report that, "it is reliably estimated that over half the several million learners who make up the world's distance education population are women" (1990, p. 22). Individual institutions, such as The Open University in BC, the University of Moncton, and Athabasca University, indicate that women consistently make up between 55-75% of total distance education

enrolment (Bourque, 1988; Spronk & Radtke, 1988; and Sturrock, 1988). In the course we taught, all of our distance education students were women.

Distance education is one of the forums in which growing numbers of women are making their voices heard. Whether they enter a study program for personal enhancement or to improve their employment opportunities, the large number of women returning to school via distance education signifies the importance of this learning mode as a means for women to challenge their marginalization in the social, political, and economic arenas of life (Faith, 1988).[7]

Feminist Pedagogy Across the Distance

Our concept of feminist pedagogy emerged from our experiences as teaching assistants holding discussion groups with anywhere from 10 to 60 individuals. As students who had been subject to a top-down, hierarchical, teacher-driven mode of instruction, we were not comfortable with replicating this form of teaching in our own classrooms. Reading the literature on feminist pedagogy, most notably, a special issue of *Women's Studies Quarterly* (1987), made us aware that we were not alone in viewing education as more than a process of depositing knowledge into student "bank accounts" (Freire, 1970). Writing on the subject of feminist pedagogy led us to further clarify our practice as feminist educators (Norlen, 1992; Smith, 1989). Out of our experiences as learners and teachers, we developed a vision of the classroom which is reflected in Shrewsbury's definition of feminist pedagogy as:

…engaged teaching/learning–engaged with self in a continuing reflective process; engaged actively with the material being studied; engaged with others in a struggle to get beyond our sexism and racism and classism and homophobia and other destructive hatreds and to work together to enhance our knowledge; engaged with the community, with traditional organizations, and with movements for social change. (1987, p. 6)

Many of these basic tenets of feminist pedagogy are similar to those in much of the literature on distance education and types of related education. For example, Leagans describes the process of extension education as,

…one of working with people, not for them; of helping people become self-reliant, not dependent on others; of making people the central actors in the drama, not stage hands or spectators; in short, helping people by means of education to put useful knowledge to work for them. (Leagans, 1961, cited in Blackburn & Flaherty, 1994, p. 1)

The critical difference between this learner-centred approach and feminist pedagogy is that the latter emerges out of a feminism which takes the material reality of women's experience into account. In its simplest form, feminism provides a critical understanding and analysis of the inequities women face and advocates strategies for

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[7]   While we may be perceived as exaggerating the effect of distance education on improving women's participation and status in social, economic, and political life, considerable debate exists concerning to what degree education enables women to widen their roles beyond the household.

change. The difficulty in presenting a single, inclusive definition of feminism relates to its long history. Over time, feminisms have emerged which differ in the emphasis they place upon sources of inequity, such as class, race/ethnicity, sexuality, dis/ability, as well as the avenues they promote for change (Jaggar & Rothenberg, 1993; Kramarae & Treichler, 1985).

As a result of the multiple perspectives incorporated within various feminist frameworks, we find it difficult to espouse the validity of one particular feminism over all others. Instead, we prefer to utilize the metaphor of lenses as articulated by Jaggar and Rothenberg,

> ...feminists increasingly recognize that different theoretical approaches are likely to be useful in different circumstances and for different purposes. People typically employ different lenses depending on what they are studying, their location with respect to the object of study, the condition of their eyes, and the purposes of their investigation. The metaphor of lenses expresses the recognition that feminist theories ultimately are tools designed for a practical purpose—the purpose of understanding women's subordination in order to end it. (1993, p. xvii)

For feminist educators, unique pedagogical challenges arise when using a distance mode of education. The following case study offers insights into some of the challenges we faced in our collaborative effort at "crossing the distance," both geographic and symbolic, among learners and teachers. The challenges we address may appear, at first glance, to be issues related to either team-teaching, distance education, feminist pedagogy or Women's Studies. Rather than occurring singularly, however, they tended to intersect and compound each other: "...what is taught and how it is taught are two complementary and interacting parts of the whole" (Maher & Dunn, cited in Coulter, 1989, p. 18). Instead of artificially dealing separately with challenges that were often experienced simultaneously, in the following narrative we will address the intersecting issues as they arose.

During the final review class, students told us at length about their thoughts and feelings concerning their experiences with the course. As feminists like Dorothy Smith have pointed out, we must begin with the experience of women in order to break the circle of androcentric knowledge. For this reason, we use our teaching experience as the point of departure and incorporate the words of our women students throughout the ensuing account.

An Offer to Teach

In April of 1993, one of the directors of tele-conferenced courses at the University of Ottawa proposed offering a Women's Studies course to students in the outlying towns of Eastern Ontario. "Would you be interested in teaching the first ever Women's Studies course?," the man asked Edith. After some discussion with colleagues, she decided to accept the offer because there was a need for a feminist course that rural women could have access to. As one student mentioned during the review, "having a Women's Studies course tele-conferenced is better than nothing at all." The importance of accessibility is also underscored by Kirby and Chugh's (1993)

findings that distance students, in an audio-teleconferencing environment, rate course availability as more important than class size or quality of sound transmission.

Having accepted the offer to teach, Edith realized that her course schedule was now extremely full. As a single mother of an adolescent son, she was worried about the time involved in developing and teaching a new course, as well as the requirement to visit each of the rural centres at least once. After discussing these concerns with Val, she suggested that we teach it together. A perfect solution, we thought, the benefits with half the workload! The naivety with which we approached this course surprises us even now. As will become clear, "crossing the distance" between our ideals and the real life situation was not as easy as we anticipated.

Getting Ready to Teach

Our initial euphoria of the benefits with half the workload was shattered very quickly. While past experience with preparing a course outline had shown that a couple of drafts usually sufficed, we spent hours going through draft after draft of the syllabus until we were both happy with it alone! This time, there were two people who had to agree on each item—goals of the course, schedule, readings, assignments, pedagogy, etc. While all team-teachers have to negotiate course content and methods, our feminist pedagogy meant that we needed to build in opportunities for student input and interaction during the course development process. In a participant-centred classroom, "students affect teachers, teachers affect students, and both affect the state of knowledge itself" (Porter & Eileenchild, cited in Klein, 1987, p. 191).

In terms of how to structure each three hour class, we decided to begin with a formal lecture followed by an informal discussion period. During the second half of the class, the students would break into small groups to discuss the readings or specific questions, and then we would reconvene to address issues raised in the groups. As it turned out, students initially had difficulty voicing their ideas with strangers, particularly "faceless ones," but by the end of the course they described the groups as "a great way to hash things out." As Bray (1988) points out in her experience as a tutor for a Women's Studies distance education course, group work allows a much deeper level of discussion and counteracts the isolation often felt by distance learners. As well, the exposure to a diversity of experience and the opportunity for disclosure made possible in group contexts are essential to consciousness-raising, an integral aspect of feminist pedagogy.

In terms of what content to provide to the students, we decided to introduce them to feminism, to the core concepts, theories, and research that have shaped Women's Studies, and to help them appreciate the ways in which its theories and findings have found application. To fulfil these objectives, we decided to begin with the founding mothers of the Women's Movement, the emergence of Women's Studies as a discipline and some of its initial debates. We would also touch on such themes as "re-discovering our voices," "women's rights as human rights," "whose body is it anyways?," and "new directions for Women's Studies." To best match these themes, we created a text with weekly readings drawn from a variety of authors and illustrated with cartoons, line drawings, photographs, poems, short stories, and newspaper clippings. This book of

readings was intended to represent diverse perspectives on the chosen topics and to encourage students to challenge the authority of the printed word, as well as to be available for future reference. While the students found some of the academic readings "difficult and boring," the same issues explored in other formats were "fun and thought-provoking."

In keeping with the objectives of the course and our own feminist pedagogy, we left many of the decisions regarding course assignments to the students. For example, in one project they could select a traditional research paper, a critical book review, an oral history, an in-class presentation, or "other," such as a short story or sculpture. We felt it important to incorporate such a broad range of choice to enhance our students' control over their own learning processes, and to validate their abilities as knowledge producers rather than consumers. Expressing her reaction to the project choices, one woman said, "I first felt panic about all these options but then realized that choice is what it's all about."

Getting Acquainted

Our tele-conferenced course involved a classroom on the main campus with thirty students, and two rural centres with nine students each. This meant that 65% of our students had both audio and visual contact with us, while the remaining 35% had to rely upon audio only. Though we were dealing with the combination of a traditional classroom format and a distance mode of education, we quickly realized that similar problems and issues concerning women as learners arise in both contexts.

Each centre had projection equipment available, as well as an electronic blackboard which transmitted messages via a television screen. Whoever was lecturing wore a microphone headset which transmitted her voice to each of the centres. Students had desk-top speakers which they had to remember to turn on while commenting and then ensure were turned "off" after talking. The professor's voice, as well as the return comments, were heard in all of the centres but no visual image of the speaker was available, except in the imagination. One student recommended that in the future group photos should be distributed early in the course in order to "connect a voice with a face." While this is a response to one of the challenges of the nature of distance education technology, her suggestion also reflects the value feminist pedagogy places upon "engaged teaching/learning."

After we introduced ourselves and the course during the first class, we asked the students to write a letter describing themselves and their interests. This allowed us to modify course content in order to make it more relevant to their experiences and interests. The off-campus students indicated they were mainly rural women, as we had expected. Most were married (or had been), with children, running a household, and studying parttime. Not surprisingly, they tended to be middle-aged or older. Most were also working in the paid workforce, employed primarily in traditional female occupations, like nursing, teaching, or clerical work.

I am a full-time teacher (grade 5), mother (2 sons–19 and 22), and wife. I would have included homemaker a few years ago but this is becoming much less important as I age.

They varied in that some were rather seasoned distance education students who had taken courses for as long as ten years, while a few were undertaking their first such course.

The Ottawa students were younger (18-24 years of age), less likely to have any tele-distance experiences, and more likely to be enrolled fulltime. Very few women in any of the centres had previous feminist or Women's Studies instruction, although the Ottawa students were more likely to have encountered it.

Hello…I am 24 years old and am a third year Economics student here at Ottawa U. This course is my first experience with formal study in the women's studies field. I am currently enrolled in six courses and am graduating this spring to a position in the banking industry in Toronto.

Team-Teaching

In the traditional university classroom, the professor is generally seen as the whole "team". In the case that we are reporting on, the team involved at least seven individuals: two professors, two technicians, and three administrative support staff. We relied extensively on them in all three locations to ensure that we were "hooked up" with the out-of-town centres, to duplicate and send all materials in time for class, to pick up and forward completed assignments for marking, and then to return them to the students. While we had initially imagined that team-teaching referred only to us, in reality many other individuals played key roles. Our notion of an interactive feminist pedagogy meant that our students also had a role to play.

The students, however, were primarily aware of just the two of us; that alone was unusual to the majority of them. "Two professors? Well, who is the main one?" "Who do we see if we have questions?" "Who will evaluate us?" These were the typical questions posed to us at the beginning. For most of the students, their confusion was settled fairly quickly. They came to understand that we would confer on all decisions and therefore answers to problems would not be as quick to come.

The students experienced a few difficulties adapting to our team-teaching. Unfortunately, the feminist pedagogy we found most comfortable in the classroom sometimes placed our students in a position of discomfort. Students expected us, the instructors, to *know* and when we stepped out of the role of expert, they felt cheated, threatened and insecure. In their comments and actions they indicated quite clearly that we were not doing our jobs when we did not have the answer because we had to consult with one another. Though many eventually expressed the sentiment that "two heads were better than one," most women developed an individual preference for one or the other of us when they asked questions or needed advice. This appeared to resolve their discomfort regarding team-teaching. The students' reactions made apparent the distance between our expectations and the realities of team-teaching a Women's Studies, distance education course, while trying to implement a feminist pedagogy.

"Teach-nological" Challenges

As mentioned earlier, the first half of each three hour class was devoted to lecturing, but co-ordinating the technical aspects to ensure all centres were "on-line" often took more time than anticipated. We had to ask each centre separately if they had received class material, wait for their individual responses, and occasionally send someone in search of missing material. Each of these took time and seldom did we actually have a full lecture period.

The technology controlled us in other ways as well–from the lack of flexibility in the classroom to the clothing that we would wear. We could not walk in with newly discovered material because everything had to be sent out at least forty-eight hours in advance to reach the rural centres. We could show a film only if there were three copies available for simultaneous viewing. Seldom did all three classrooms finish the film at the same time, so again, we had to wait before continuing. The microphone headset was connected to a battery pack that had to be attached to our clothing so we always had to remember to wear something with pockets or a belt. Near the beginning of the course, one of us forgot and had to borrow a jacket from a student. We missed the freedom of the traditional classroom where we were not constantly controlled by the technology.

Some of our students expressed similar sentiments. As one woman said, "I was afraid of speaking into the mike, on top of speaking at all. It's more serious or official somehow." It was a great struggle for many of the women to speak, particularly into a microphone. This mode of communication was confusing and sometimes frustrating. The students had to learn to turn speaker boxes on and off each time any comment was made. This prevented the mikes from fading into the background. Their "in your face" quality, as one student put it, was continually reinforced.

Recent literature on the genderization of technology notes that there is a cultural conjunction between masculinity and technology and a disjunction between femininity and technology (Cockburn, 1985; Norlen, 1989; Rothschild, 1983). This implies that female students in distance education, faced with tele-communications technology, may experience it as disconcerting. The fact that our two male students used the classroom technology with ease, whereas the female students were more reluctant to do so, appears to support this possibility.

In addition to the formality of using a speaker box, naming themselves and identifying their centre discouraged students from commenting freely. Speaking as "Gena in Ottawa," rather than as an anonymous voice, magnified their responsibility for their ideas and their vulnerability to others' reactions. Disembodied, floating voices were also disconcerting when students neglected to identify themselves.

The students indicated that another frustrating aspect of the technology was the inability to speak simultaneously. As noted earlier, an important aspect of both feminist pedagogy and distance education is the occasions when students can discuss, in small and large groups. It helps break down barriers caused by diversity and eliminates the isolation of studying at a distance. Face-to-face discussion is often typified by voices overlapping on voices. However, when using a communication mode

which transmits information in just one direction, it was imperative that only one speaker "had the floor" at a time. Judging when a speaker was finished or who had the floor next was not always easy. The beginning or ending of a comment was often "lost" during transmission resulting in frequent requests of "Could you repeat that?" Even by the end of the course, when the students had grown accustomed to turning their speaker boxes on and off, they had not adopted a new conversational style.

The course was scheduled as an evening session to allow access for women who did paid labour or had children. As one woman wrote in her letter of introduction, "I have a small daughter and can only attend evening classes at the moment." By the end of everyone's day, they (and we) were often tired. For many students, feminism was a new concept and being tired interfered with their learning process. In the small discussion groups in the rural centres, we were sometimes unable to help when contentious issues arose. Our physical absence contributed to many misunderstandings and to resistance in some students. Without privacy to deal with individual cases (since all communication through the speakers was overheard by everyone), we were unable to overcome this resistance on the spot. Individual students were also able to withhold their participation more easily when we could not visually monitor them.

Another disturbing coping mechanism was for the students to speak only within their own centres. The rural students occasionally turned off their speaker boxes, and tuned us out to carry on their own discussions. While we applauded their independence, we felt that they needed the instructors' intervention to help them make links to course materials, and that all the centres would benefit from an exchange of dialogue. We could do nothing, however, to be reconnected because this power lay entirely with the rural students. The technology made it easy for them to withdraw and to resist our feminist pedagogy by "disengaging" from the teaching/learning process.

Consciousness-Raising Across the Distance

Both feminist teachers and distance educators have consistently highlighted the role of education in social change. Such transformation can only occur through the raising of students' consciousness; that is, by encouraging them to re-examine their experiences in the context of larger cultural, social, and economic issues broached in the course. This, in turn, requires a pedagogy premised upon "formats that engage subjective experiences, encourage interaction, and treat knowledge as an ever-evolving, mutually developing process" (Bell, 1987, p. 75).

Re-examining one's experiences often poses challenges to basic belief systems and, therefore, contributes to feelings of discomfort. We have found that a pedagogical style which uses humour to lighten many issues often mitigates this unease. Unfortunately, our humour seldom came across the airwaves when the students could not see us–visual cues were missing for those sitting in a room with only voices in the air. Another helpful strategy involves making the formal portions of the class as relevant to each individual as possible by getting to know the students. Obviously, our familiarity with distant students was greatly reduced when only microphones and

speaker boxes were available. The usual chances for casual conversation during breaks or after class were missing.

During the course, we became aware that a core group of students in one rural centre was familiar with and committed to feminist ideas, while the other centre was not. In the main classroom the split was about half and half. Because everything was audio only, a number of pre-conceived images developed (as we learned when we visited the rural centres). For example, the students who were primarily silent later said "the feminists were controlling the discussions."

In Ottawa we were aware that the differences in age and life experience of the students appeared to be the dividing line. As older women expressed ideas, the younger students occasionally looked at each other and rolled their eyes. In the main classroom we saw this and dealt with it, but in the rural centres we did not have visual cues to help us overcome the divisions that were occurring. As a result, resentment built up and obstructed the effectiveness of the communication process. While this often happens in traditional classrooms, being at a distance made resolving the differences problematic. We were not aware of the group dynamics until we visited the rural centres and, in one case, it was too late to resolve the entrenched attitudes.

The differences between the rural and urban centres became particularly visible after a "Women in History" lecture concluded. An Ottawa student suggested we replicate a traditional recipe book which would reflect not only the ingredients, but also the labour of our mothers and grandmothers as they created meals and maintained a home. Each student would supply one entry, and together, the knowledge we created would be a collaborative, concrete and lasting product to reflect the diversity of our own history as women, and to revalue an often denigrated aspect of women's work.

While the Ottawa students and one off-campus centre were enthusiastically supportive of this project, the other centre was first silent and then adamantly opposed. They expressed their horror at the prospect that their first ever Women's Studies course would produce, in their words, "yet another recipe book." After an exhaustive discussion, we learned that these off-campus women experienced great resistance and ridicule from friends, family, and coworkers for taking a Women's Studies course. Producing a "recipe book" would only magnify this hostility, they felt. For us, this reinforced Magda Lewis' observation that:

> ...we cannot expect...students will readily appropriate a political stance that is truly counter-hegemonic, unless we also acknowledge the ways in which our feminist practice/politics creates, rather than ameliorates, feeling of threat: the threat of abandonment; the threat of having to struggle within unequal power relations; the threat of psychological/social/sexual, as well as economic and political marginality; the threat of retributive violence—threats lived in concrete embodied ways. (1990, p. 485)

We learned that the students who had been exposed to feminist perspectives in prior courses were familiar with challenging basic beliefs about the values of women's

work. They did not experience the recipe book as an unusual suggestion. For some of the distant students, juggling motherhood, homemaking, paid employment, and part-time studies appeared to contribute to their desire to create something "non-stereotypically female." To borrow from Virginia Woolf, having "a room of one's own" did not include revisiting the kitchen for these women.

This episode also reflected the difference in interaction that the main campus students had with us, that is, the informal freedom to converse during breaks (when the suggestion for the recipe book was first made). The off-campus students were brought into our "recipe" conversation midstream, thus reinforcing their "distance" and their perceived position as *outsiders*.[8] For some of the students, this event set the tone for much of the remaining course and contributed to our difficulty in "crossing the distance".

For us, this draining experience brought home the demands of consciousness-raising across the distance. Ideally, education in the feminist classroom pushes students to see their experiences in new and different lights. The goal for the students is to integrate new learning and in the process modify past understandings, while remaining grounded in their experiences throughout, and thus, to develop a sense of themselves as knowledge producers (Shrewsbury, 1987). The "infamous recipe book episode," as our students came to refer to it, illustrates dilemmas a feminist distance instructor may encounter when attempting to achieve these pedagogical ideals.

"Signing Off"

One of our initial questions was: "Could we adapt the feminist pedagogical approaches we had developed in face-to-face classrooms to suit distance education?" By the end of the course, we answered this with a qualified yes. Our pedagogy met with considerable success, though there were many unanticipated aspects of the course which were difficult to adjust to. We were unprepared, initially, for the intersecting challenges of team-teaching a Women's Studies distance education course using a feminist pedagogy. As teachers, it was a unique experience of engaged teaching/learning.

When the course was finished–when all the planning and preparation, angst and frustration, exhaustion and exhilaration was over–we were still grappling with the question: "What aspects of the course design or our own behaviour made the course enlightening, even captivating for the main campus and one off-campus group, but maddening and isolating for the other rural centre?" Ultimately, the criteria used to judge the impact of Women's Studies distance education on students are "the degree to which [it] both empowers learners to make choices about their personal lives and encourages them to engage in socially conscious activities with others" (Coulter, 1989, p. 18).

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8   We borrow this expression from Virginia Woolf's (1986) discussion of women as *outsiders* in education.

Most of our students expressed satisfaction and even delight by the end of the course, but one group of students, concentrated in an off-campus centre, expressed dissatisfaction and disappointment. If the students' course evaluations were any indication, our feminist perspective was an integral part of the most enthusiastic appraisals. Those students who claimed the most rewarding learning experience linked it with feminist consciousness-raising, and their growing understanding that what they thought were private problems were, in fact, public and political issues. It seemed, then, that the poor evaluations were linked with a failure to facilitate such consciousness-raising in one of the centres.

The origins of distance education have always emphasized both individual and social change. As one of our distant students declared, "I'll never forget this course. Everything I learned I now see in the world around me. I'll never again be the same person. Look out world, here I come." Molyneux also reminds us that, "...while education is a social process systematically organized and institutionalised, learning is a personal experience. It begins and ends with the individual..." (cited in Sweet, 1989, p. 3).

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