

ARTICLES

WOMEN AS LEARNERS: ISSUES FOR VISUAL AND VIRTUAL CLASSROOMS

Elizabeth J. Burge

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

Abstract

This article uses three categories—Access and Retention, Learning Designs and Course Content—to produce a major summary of questions and issues facing women in distance and adult education. Distance education is defined with reasons for its popularity. The years 1974 - 1988 are examined in terms of writings about women in distance education; one major source for this summary is a published 1988 international collection edited by K. Faith; other sources are recent articles in distance and adult education journals and conference proceedings. Access and Retention, the first category of questions facing women distance educators is defined as the extent to which women are attracted to and are able to successfully enter courses and stay until course completion. Under-representation of women in courses and factors inhibiting women's enrolment are discussed. The second category, Learning Design, involves criteria for feminist classrooms in distance modes, grading, learner support, and genderization of technologies. The third category of questions is Course Content. The author maintains that "issues around untested assumptions, imagery, invisibility and epistemology are still as relevant for distance classrooms [virtual classrooms] as for the walled classroom [visual classrooms]."

Résumé

Cet article utilise trois catégories—l'accessibilité et la persévérance dans les études, l'élaboration d'activités d'apprentissage et les contenus de cours—pour faire un premier résumé d'importance sur les questions et les problèmes qui concernent les femmes en éducation à distance et en éducation des adultes. L'éducation à distance y est d'abord définie en tenant compte des raisons qui expliquent sa

popularité. Les écrits sur les femmes et l'éducation à distance ont été recensés pour la période de 1974 à 1988. Une collection internationale (Faith, K. (Ed.); 1988) a constitué une référence majeure; d'autres écrits récents sur le sujet proviennent de revues et d'actes de congrès scientifiques. La première catégorie de questions (accessibilité et persévérance dans les études) examine jusqu'à quel point les femmes sont attirées par l'éducation à distance et peuvent y prendre des cours et les compléter avec succès. La sous-représentation des femmes et les facteurs qui nuisent à leur inscription font l'objet d'une discussion. La deuxième catégorie de questions (élaboration d'activités d'apprentissage) porte sur les critères à considérer dans l'organisation de classes féministes dans une modalité d'éducation à distance, sur la notation, sur le support à l'étudiante et sur le sexisme et les technologies. La troisième catégorie de questions a trait aux contenus de cours. L'auteure affirme que "les mêmes problèmes de postulats non vérifiés, d'images stéréotypées, de non visibilité et d'épistémologie sont également présents dans les 'classes' d'éducation à distance (classes extra muros) que dans les classes conventionnelles (classes intra muros)".

We don't simply want to make higher education a place where more women are more comfortable; we want to change the nature of what has previously constituted the disciplines so that we are in the content as well as in the institution, in the lecture as well as in the lecture theatre. Or in the case of distance education, in the text as well as in the armchair studying it. (Kirkup, 1988, pp. 287)

Introduction¹

Gill Kirkup's summary (1988) of the goals for women distance educators is elegant and ambitious. The key problems she

¹ My appreciation goes to three people: Nathalie Griffon, whose invitation to me to speak at the 1989 CASAE/ACEEA conference in the TéléUniversité challenged me to this synthesis; Karlene Faith, whose support and critical insights helped keep that synthesis true to the intents of the writers; and Lynn Romero, who wove her way undauntedly through some near-illegible threads to produce the manuscript.

addresses—under-representation, marginalization, and inappropriate learning designs for women learners and educators—are comprehensive and demand some radical solutions if adult and higher education is to become more feminist. Women distance educators are beginning to discuss publicly the problems they face regarding women learners and share them with educators who work in classroom contexts. As distance education expands, it is developing closer links with the visual walled classrooms of adult education, and both contexts will have to deal with similar problems and issues concerning women as learners.

Distance Education

This article summarizes the problems and issues in the public discussions of distance education and invites readers to draw similarities to their walled classroom practice. Three categories are used to group the problems: access and retention; learning designs; and course content. Each category links to published work by feminist educators in visual classrooms and their writing provides a rich and useful background. But first we should be clear about two terms: distance education and feminist education.

Distance education can best be defined in terms of what it is not: it does use institutionally organized systems for learning and teaching, but it does not conduct that learning solely within time and place bound classrooms.

Distance education is a global and rapidly growing phenomenon which offers formal learning opportunities to people who would not otherwise have access to schooling. Teachers and students are separated by physical distance, and the means by which they communicate range from basic print materials and the use of postal service to highly sophisticated communications technologies. (Faith, 1988a, pp. 5)

The increasing use of interactive real time and delayed time communications technologies such as audio and computer conferencing has dramatically improved the opportunity for adult learners to link up as independent groups, or with their tutors, course guests, librarians, administrative personnel and others. This increased capacity for interaction demands that learning designers create audio

classrooms (telephone-based with graphic enhancement) and textual or virtual classrooms (computer conferencing) and integrate small group and whole class activities with individual study, and where feasible, some face-to-face meetings. This expansion of the repertoire of learning contexts within a single course is a major factor in the convergence between adult education and distance education (Smith & Kelly, 1987).

The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) for example has used audio conferencing to link up students in structured off-campus classes across Northern Ontario since 1982, and has used computer conferencing since 1986. The University of Ottawa has used electronic blackboards since 1981. CJRT-FM Open College has used radio broadcasting for its primary delivery mode (supplemented by audio cassettes) since 1971. Other Canadian examples of innovative technologies abound (Stahmer, 1987), with a recent example of an extensive network of technologies being Contact North/Contact Nord across Northern Ontario (Contact North/Contact Nord, 1988/89).

Student numbers and courses are also increasing, but these students do not live exclusively in geographically isolated areas: significant numbers of them live in or close to urban areas (Spronk, 1988). The 1989 Canadian Association of University Continuing Education (CAUCE) handbook listed approximately 1870 courses delivered by distance and the 1989/90 Council of Ontario Universities calendar listed approximately 700 courses for Ontario. These figures relate only to the university sector; examples of other growing sectors are the Open College of the Open Learning Agency (OLA) in British Columbia and the provincial education departments running huge distance programs to help adults complete a high school diploma (McKinnon, 1989).

In summary, distance modes of learning are popular for a variety of reasons:

Geographic distance from educational institutions is no longer the single motivation for entering a distance education programme. Adults whose employment demands and/or family responsibilities preclude school attendance make up a major share of distance education enrolments. People who prefer guided or tutored independent study to classroom attendance likewise

turn to distance education programmes. However, as the papers in this volume attest, adult distance learners more often share the single fact of having enrolled in a home study programme as the only or as the most viable option for advancing their education. And whereas in the past home study was perceived as inferior to "real" schooling, developments in recent decades of high-quality study materials, access to external library services, increasing sophistication in tutorial methods and myriad uses of technology have significantly advanced both the quality, we believe and the reputation, certainly, of distance education. Economy and flexibility continue to be the most obvious characteristics of home study, but this method is no longer assumed to be less effective than classroom learning.... (Faith, 1988a, pp. 6)

Feminist Education

While distance educators can indicate the advantages and quality of their methods and provide programs to complement those of visual classroom-based educators, each group is now aware of an important and additional perspective—the feminist perspective. What is feminist education? Its complex definition has three components: a definition of feminism, a correspondingly specific philosophical and theoretical framework, and certain principles for learning and teaching.

Essentially, feminism places a primary emphasis on the conditions of all women. It critically analyses the various forms of inequality, marginalization and oppression to which women are subjected as a result of their gender, race/ethnicity, and social class, and it also promotes strategies for change. Cheris Kramarae and Paula Treichler (1985) list many definitions that both reflect the long history of feminism and show that various forms of male domination affect all women, not just the economically or educationally disadvantaged. Elizabeth Minnich (1983) defines feminism by noting:

Feminism has to do with a cast of mind: a way of thinking, and a movement of heart and spirit; a way of being and acting with and for others. The cast of mind is fundamentally one of critique; the movement of heart is toward friendship.... The cast of mind is one of

critique, is critical in the technical sense. Feminist thought takes nothing as given or settled for all time. It accepts no truths as revealed and holds none to be directly reflective of what is "natural," and so unquestionable. It sees the prescription in apparently descriptive statements. It is radical: it seeks the roots. (Minnich, 1983, pp. 317-8)

Rosalind Delmar's definition hints at further problems of definition:

Many would agree that at the very least a feminist is someone who holds that women suffer discrimination because of their sex, that they have specific needs which remain negated and unsatisfied and that the satisfaction of those needs would require a radical change in the social, economic and political order. But beyond that, things immediately become more complicated. (Delmar, 1986, pp. 8)

The complications to which Delmar refers really show up and have implications for feminist education in the second component of feminism: the specific philosophical and theoretical frameworks. Although Alison Jaggar and Paula Rothenberg (1984) explain how liberal, socialist and radical feminism -- the most widely used frameworks so far -- operate in various social systems, such as the family and the workplace, they do not include education as one of the systems! Each framework has its strengths and its limitations: the liberals' preoccupation with limits to civil freedoms and the achievement of economic and other equalities for women; the socialists' analyses of women's oppressions in terms of social class and capitalist-based patriarchy; and the radicals' belief that women's sexuality and physicality are primary sites of oppression, that women's (qua woman) oppression is even more fundamental than race or class oppression, and that radical changes are needed to social institutions, to the point of elimination of oppressive social systems, e.g., the nuclear family.

Personally, it is difficult to declare allegiance to a single framework without acknowledging the value of others. Angela Miles's approach, however, is attractive, albeit very ambitious, because it calls for an integrative framework. She draws on various authors to argue that integrative feminism is neither

...simply abandoning nor simply entering male-defined and male-dominated contexts...(rather, priority is placed) on autonomous feminist political organization and development as the core of feminist practice; (with) participation in male-dominated activities as equally necessary...beyond simple pressure for women's inclusion in the world to become a full politics concerned with transforming the world. (Miles, 1989, pp. 22, 19).

Can feminist educators transform their world? A major educational goal of feminists is "this process of constructing and validating our own knowledge" (Spender, 1980, pp. 17), and for one very good reason:

While it has been only men who have decreed the standards of excellence, who have decided what is significant, relevant, appropriate and believable, then any knowledge which women have constructed that is in conflict with the male view, runs the risk of being classified as "inferior", even 'emotional' or 'peculiar'. This is why it is crucially important that women begin to create our own means for producing and validating knowledge which is consistent with our own personal experience. We need to formulate our own yardsticks for we are doomed to deviancy if we persist in measuring ourselves against the male standard. (Spender, 1980, pp. 17)

Setting criteria for Dale Spender's goals of feminist education demands some radical processes: challenging assumptions about what is worth knowing, refusing to use patriarchal definitions of "the educated person", creating women-based knowledge, dealing with systemic sexism and creating women-friendly environments for learning. Helen Lenskyj sums up the problems faced by feminist educators: they focus on how

...traditional male-dominated educational systems maintain existing gender, race and social class inequalities, by controlling the construction of knowledge and defining how knowledge should be transmitted. (Lenskyj, 1989, pp. 18)

Feminist educators recognize certain basic principles for approaching the content and process of learning and teaching. These principles form the third component of a feminist perspective and may be grouped thus:

Course content:

- . Use feminist analyses to examine the lived experience of women, including their early socialization and schooling.
- . Value the contributions made by women to the production of knowledge.
- . Analyze the differences between received and objective knowledge and personal and subjective knowledge.
- . Apply gender analyses to the production of "malestream" knowledge.
- . Value and use the subjective experience of women and the special behaviours that are characteristics of women.

Learning Process:

- . Encourage learners to use their own feelings, intuition and imagination as resources and strengths for learning.
- . Strengthen cooperative and collaborative processes, as distinct from competitive and hierarchical ones.
- . Work toward self empowerment and living with the new insights about the condition of women.
- . Maintain a climate safe enough to encourage open questions and appropriate personal disclosures.

Teacher Behaviour:

- . Encourage self empowerment and transformative learning
- . Acknowledge the age, race, class and sexually related differences in women's experience, without denying areas of common experiences and oppression that cut across those differences.
- . Help new and established feminist students to support each other.
- . Handle with sensitivity the emotions that often arise as women begin to name covert and overt forms of misogyny, and develop their own strategies for dealing with oppression.
- . Ensure that women students get equal attention and respect in classes involving women and men students.

More detailed clusters of principles and criteria for women-centred curricula have been produced more recently by Maggie Coats (1989) and Helen Lenskyj (1989). Coats's characteristics are grouped into six clusters: barriers, the use of subjective experience, gender analyses, group support, participative activities and course evaluation. Lenskyj asks her students to analyze material using feminist criteria that are grouped according to gender, race/ethnicity, social class, and sexuality.

Over the past decade or so, feminist educators working in visual classrooms have produced a significant record to illuminate the concept of feminist classrooms. General collections have sketched the scope of processes and contexts in women's learning (Cole, 1989; Minnich, O'Barr & Rosenfeld, 1988; Gaskell & McLaren, 1987; *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 1987; Culley & Portuges, 1985; Bunch and Pollack, 1983). Feminist epistemology has been explored and delineated (Minnich, O'Barr & Rosenfeld, 1988; Belenky et al. 1986; Spender, 1981; Smith, 1978), as have principles for feminist, and non-sexist research (Tomm, 1989; Eichler, 1987; Warren, 1987; Martin, 1986). Gender socialization and class issues have been analyzed (Weis, 1988; Weiler, 1988; Russell, 1986; Walker & Barton, 1983), and the impact of women's studies courses on conventional curricula discussed

(de Wolfe, 1988; Raymond, 1985). Women's learning and feminist pedagogy issues have encouraged many analyses of practice (e.g., Gaskell, McLaren & Novogrodsky, 1989; Klein, 1987; Hooks, 1984; Spender & Sarah, 1988; Minnich, 1983; Thompson, 1983). Feminists of colour have explained the multiple oppressions for women of colour living in predominantly white societies, outlined the race-based divisions evident between feminists of all cultures and races, and developed feminist pedagogies for Black students (e.g., Hooks, 1988, 1984; Lee, 1985; Thornhill, 1983). The issue of whether to separate or integrate women's studies courses in relation to institutional curricula is becoming more contentious as feminist teachers debate its various aspects, e.g., the appropriateness of non-feminist men teaching women's studies courses and the use of feminist principles and processes in classrooms, regardless of the content of courses.

Feminist Distance Education

Can feminist distance educators build on their sisters' record and transform their own world? Certainly they do not yet have as extensive a record as their classroom based colleagues, despite formal distance education having a 150 year old history. For example a scan in 1987 of two major journals in distance education revealed that since 1974 and 1980, respectively, only six articles were concerned overtly with women. Relatively isolated but significant activity by pioneering educators, such as Ailsa Swarbrick is little more than a decade old (Swarbrick, 1978, 1980). Until 1982, international and national conference activity did not specifically acknowledge the large numbers of women distance learners nor the needs and concerns of women educators. The gender split at distance education conferences always revealed far fewer women than men delegates (Burge, 1988). The scene changed in 1982 at the 12th world conference of the International Council for Correspondence Education, now the International Council for Distance Education (ICDE). Women delegates (25% of the total) began to express their feelings of trivialization, marginalization and exclusion—as a result of various linguistic structures, vocabulary and behaviours indicative of sexism and unconscious assumptions of male power. From that conference developed the Women's International Network (WIN) of the ICDE. Its establishment and goals of support, networking and professional development were in tune with networks in other professional fields.

It was not until May 1988 that the first Canadian public discussion on gender in distance education was held, and not without expressions of doubt that the subject should even be discussed! Individual Canadian women distance educators were beginning to discuss various issues in the professional literature (e.g. Faith, 1988c; Faith & Coulter, 1988; Bray, 1988; Coulter, Delehanty & Spronk, 1983), as were peers elsewhere, e.g., Rowland (1982), but the issues remained fragmented and beyond the purview of "male-stream" discussion. Clearly there was a need to begin more comprehensive documentation: to share experiences, to confirm and celebrate achievements, to extrapolate across case studies, and to suggest research agendas.

Between 1985 and 1988, the first set of international descriptions and analyses was produced. *Toward New Horizons for Women in Distance Education: International Perspectives* (Faith, 1988b) raises significant questions in its analysis of institutional, societal, and educational problems relevant to women and girl learners. But so now do an increasing number of published articles and conference papers. It is appropriate, therefore, to now integrate those questions and problems, not only for those in the virtual classrooms of distance education, but also for those working in visual classrooms because issues of how women and girls learn are not necessarily distinguished by delivery format. Also we can expect that adult learners increasingly will use a variety of delivery formats throughout their lives. The questions and concerns are grouped under three broad categories: access and retention; learning designs; and course content.

Access and Retention

Access and retention refers to the extent to which women are attracted to and are able to enter courses and stay until course completion. Access and retention issues are not about molding women *into* traditional male systems and curricula: they are about the extent to which systems and curricula need transforming so that they are women-centred as well as male-centred and hence sensitive to both sexes. In circumstances where women learners analyze their experiences of marginalization, trivialization, oppression, or male violence against them, they need a safe and supportive group of peers—in a women-only course. One big question for distance educators stems from the open access, or minimal pre-requisite entry qualifications of some distance institutions: should institutions be allowed to use open access policies to block the implementation of

courses designed exclusively for women? If they do, they may escape the challenge of establishing women only, women's studies courses against opposition from conservative staff members (Kirkup, 1988b). Another major question relates to the presence of women in courses generally: how to acknowledge the "experiential disparities" between men and women (Kirkup, 1988b). The limited scope in the work experience of many women, especially when that work is traditionally "women's work", makes it difficult for those women to understand course content that is based on male experience and work places. Women may drop out of courses for reasons really associated with self esteem—thinking they are not intelligent or motivated enough, when in fact they cannot carry out course exercises effectively because they are based on male-oriented business and industrial work settings.

Under-representation of women in courses is another key issue, related to representation in both traditional and non traditional courses. Work headed by Ailsa Swarbrick and others in the Open University (UK) to help women enter technology and management courses resulted in some very positive outcomes for the participants (Swarbrick, 1978), but as Gill Kirkup acknowledges, these fragmented efforts are creating a situation of slow progress. Important research in West Germany has indicated that, contrary to global patterns,

...only one in four distance students is a woman while the proportion of women in traditional universities is about forty per cent. Among the newly matriculated students at the West German FernUniversitat (Distance University), women comprise a slightly higher percentage but even in this group only three in ten students are female. Thus women are extremely under represented in terms of access and even more so in terms of continued participation (von Prummer, Kirkup & Spronk, 1988, pp. 59).

The factors inhibiting women's enrolment include the content of degree programs being based more on male tradition and preferences; the lack of institution-based encouragement for women to enter these programs; the prohibitive costs of courses, especially for women who have little or no disposable income of their own; job, family and study placing triple demands on personal time and energy; the feelings of peer isolation that may be generated by student-tutor study methods; and the fact that in most households women still have primary

responsibility for nurturance and solving many family crises and emergencies.

There are less obvious but equally as effective pressures and demotivators within personal networks -- husbands, children and others create pressures such as verbal opposition to study, sabotage of course materials, denial of support, creation of guilt, undermining of confidence, playing the victim needing care from the woman who wants her own time to study, and reversion to traditional stereotypes regarding the "place" of women in society and the home (Coulter, Delehanty & Spronk, 1983). An irony presents itself here: juxtapose real personal and family pressures and structural barriers with the rhetoric about the inconvenience of home-based opportunities of distance education, and it appears that home study may act to have two negative consequences. One consequence is keeping women "in their place," i.e., at home and out of the world; a second one is allowing others to assume that such learning is merely a free-time indulgence (Faith & Coulter, 1986). Where home support is evident, the multiple demands of home, work, study and community responsibilities still require sustained energy and finely tuned organizational skills as student stories attest (Lohnes, 1987; Johnson, 1988).

Learning Design

The second category of problems and issues is learning design. Definitions and criteria are needed for feminist virtual classrooms and for tutor-student interaction by mail. The practical implications of differences between feminist teaching and "good andragogy" (Burge & Lenskyj, 1990) need to be explored. The new communications technologies can create either collaborative and supportive environments, or reinforce competitive or hierarchical processes. A *collaborative* style is very different from the "singular" talk in which people talk over or past each other, trying to make a point but without acknowledging the prior contribution of others. How can distance educators, so used to creating directive and well-structured materials for predictable learning outcomes, give women learners real choices and encourage less predictable transformative learning? Feminist distance mode teachers who value the holistic approach of connecting the cognitive and the affective, the political and the personal, the private and public, do not have visual and kinaesthetic cues to help them determine class members' reactions. They can, however, develop

the ability to hear vocal cues, pauses, and silences that may indicate negative feelings or psychological withdrawal. They can also organize local support/tutorial groups and weekend workshops for face-to-face meetings. Sensitivity to these non-cognitive issues however is not guaranteed with all tutors; institutions therefore have to be able and willing to invest in appropriate tutor training. In work places where male and female staff may be using distance education materials for work-based training, will the local leader or tutor be sensitive to gender based differences in classroom behaviour? Moving to the issue of helping women develop effective learning strategies, how-to-study guides have to recognize that many women cannot allocate long periods of time to study:

In self defense, I developed study habits which I'm sure no one [at the university] would even remotely recommend, but ones I'm sure that fellow students would recognize. I opened my books first thing in the morning and studied five minutes here, five minutes there, from morning till night, as my family and friends devised schemes to ensure I never had an hour of solid study time. (Johnson, 1988, pp. 2)

The delicate but crucial process of grading evidence of learning, that is, how to grade in feminist contexts, must be considered. When is it appropriate to grade against the norm, or against set criteria, in order to acknowledge personal growth and change? For example, someone may have made huge strides in a course in terms of self esteem and her ability to articulate but may not score well on criterion referenced testing; the educator has to match giving personal encouragement with meeting institutional requirements. Balancing the ethical demands of being honest with the student about the stresses of studentship with the moral demands to support and trust the learner is not easy for counsellors or tutors. Experience indicates that counselling and other support mechanisms for distance learners are needed to overcome the problems of low levels of confidence and self esteem (Young, 1988), and dysfunctional disparities between the work experiences of women and men (e.g., Heiler & Richards, 1988b).

The work of Barbara Spronk and Donna Radtke (1988b) in working with Canadian Native women and of Loene Furler and Carol Scott (1988b) with South Australian Aboriginal women deserve notice. Spronk and Radtke point out that the educational goals of Canadian

Native women are directed toward "self determination and tribal sovereignty over land" (p. 224). The women have to cope with family and communal responsibilities while studying but those responsibilities also create supports when the women are faced with other problems related to violence, lack of money and transport. Aboriginal women in South Australia do not strive for sex-based equity in the Western sense; they strive for cultural equity with white people. They have their own separate ceremonial life and a highly developed, active feminine "sphere" in Aboriginal life. They regard education as "a vehicle for raising the life chances of the whole group (i.e. women as well as men) and realizing the aims of cultural self-determination and self-management" (Furler & Scott, 1988b, pp. 234). Learning designs in such education have to avoid the imposition of hidden and inappropriate curricula that conflict with cultural perspectives and destroy traditional rules for social control and nurturance. Understanding these conflicts and suggesting appropriate action is no mean feat for people from white cultures.

The conditions to engender trust and comfort in disclosing personal information are especially crucial for women who are building their self confidence and stabilizing new beliefs and skills. In discovering how and why they have been socialized as girls and women, and with what negative consequences, open and often very frank discussion has to occur. Such discussion often generates negative feelings (anger, denial, bitterness), positive ones (warmth, excitement, solidarity) and certain stages and sequences of reactive behaviour (Register, 1979). Tutors in virtual classrooms therefore have multiple challenges: for example, working without paralinguistic cues, and helping the woman who is new to feminist perspectives communicate with experienced feminist students. How is the delicate issue of the use of power resolved so that power is used appropriately?

Some facilitators may be reluctant to use power in ways antithetical to feminist process (Friedman, 1985; Maher, 1987) with the result that misogynist, racist or homophobic views expressed by some students may pass unchallenged. This latter situation is not in the best interests of feminist students, since an understanding of the links between the various kinds of oppression experienced by disadvantaged and marginalized groups in society is a crucial component of all feminist analysis. (Burge & Lenskyj, 1989, pp. 12).

Another key question concerns the genderization of new communications technologies. Conceptual frameworks and gender-sensitive criteria for assessing technologies are needed (Lentell, 1989; Rothschild, 1988). Educators should take into account the fact that many women cannot get access to technology (to buy a computer for example) or capture enough time to participate consistently in audio classrooms at local sites. Will the characteristics of these technologies help promote feminist classrooms? Will enough feminist researchers get enough research and field development funds to influence research agendas for applications of new technologies? We have to question the epistemological assumptions of many research approaches and the limits of prior research based on male subjects (Warren, 1987).

Course Content

The third and final category of questions is course content. The issues around sex role stereotyping, untested assumptions, imagery, female invisibility and epistemology are as relevant for virtual classrooms as for visual classrooms. Karlene Faith has warned that the content of certain courses, e.g., health or nutrition, may imply or reinforce sex-based responsibilities for family or child rearing tasks, or indicate implicitly that women do not need education for paid and public employment (Faith, 1988a).

Countries engaged in educational reform commonly introduce courses specifically for women on family care and nutrition, with the straight forward implications that 1) women have a sex-bound responsibility for these domestic activities, and 2) women do not share with men the same need for knowledge and skills required by public life or the paid labour force. Such sex-specific curriculum, based on gender-role traditions, may advance family health, which must be the first priority. However, it will not advance the fundamental struggle for equality. Ultimately, neither justice in the abstract nor a concrete commitment to human development can be seen as a priority within an approach to education which exclusively delegates females to the least socially empowering activities. (Faith, 1988a, pp. 10-11)

How are women and girls represented in course content? Barbara Matiru and Debbie Gachuhi in Kenya have analyzed some course materials in terms of how the sexes were represented in illustration, and in character prominence and roles.

In (some) subjects men and boys are illustrated three times as often as women and girls...girls and women are indirectly taught to develop negative feelings about themselves, male characters constituted over 75% of the total characters in all the courses (surveyed by the writers)...

Predictably, male characters in these courses are portrayed as fearless, strong, brave, hardworking, influential, wealthy, bold, clever and wise. The female characters are described as fearful, doubtful, embarrassed, stupid, pretty, emotional and well-behaved (Matiru & Gachuhi, 1988b, pp. 142-145).

Females have been relegated to their traditional roles in society—that of being subordinate, housebound, passive and inferior. (Matiru & Gachuhi, 1988b, pp. 151).

Subordination to males is one issue, but the related one is that of the complete invisibility of women in printed records. Dorothy Smith has summarized the source of this invisibility:

Women have largely been excluded from the work of producing the forms of thought and the images and symbols in which thought is expressed and ordered. There is a circle effect. Men attend to and treat as significant what men say. The circle of men whose writing and talk was significant to each other extends backwards in time 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.... This is how a tradition is formed. (Smith, 1978, as quoted in Faith, 1988a, pp. 12)

Women, fortunately, are recording their heritage and women scholars are stressing the need to "publish" the everyday achievements and experiences of women (Treicher, Kramarae & Stafford, 1985). Karlene Faith indicates some constructive changes in contemporary distance education:

Whereas distance education curricula, as in conventional schooling, continue to be dominated by patriarchal constructions of knowledge, models for change are in the making. The architects of these changes no longer acquiesce to traditional assumptions about what must be taught, how it must be taught, or to whom. They gauge truth not only in terms of what is "proven" but also in terms of what is possible, assuming that truth must include experiential and subjective realities as well as objective and quantifiable data. They recognize that the practice of handing down one objective "truth" is both arrogant and limiting. In fact, they no longer uncritically accept "objectivity," as traditionally defined, as a viable concept. (Faith, 1988a, pp. 13).

Women's studies courses help learners examine the production and ownership of knowledge and challenge the authority of received "truth"—especially as that "truth" usually relates to male views of the world. The issue of invisibility of women in distance course materials is also related to institutional difficulties in developing curricula relevant to women's needs and interests (Rowland, 1982; Oudshoorn, 1988b; Kirkup, 1988b) and in arguments about whether to separate women's studies courses or integrate them, or indeed to apply feminist analyses to all courses (Andersen, 1988). The exclusion of women's studies courses from established curricula because they are not considered a mainstream (male-stream) rigorous discipline contributes further to institutional invisibilities. If an "add women and stir" approach is used, that may have secondary effects of excluding the achievements of many women and indicating that women do not exist unless they claim exceptional achievements. The difficulties at the Netherlands and UK Open Universities in establishing and maintaining women's studies courses reflect all sorts of structural, financial, discipline-based and attitudinal issues that are ripe for use by conservative faculty to exclude, denigrate, or withdraw support for women's studies courses (Oudshoorn, 1988b; Kirkup, 1988;

Leonard, 1985). But in terms of localized achievements -- of course design and student reactions to the courses -- those same courses have been landmarks (Kirkup, 1983; McIntosh, 1979). That the courses (in most cases) have been designed and implemented by young, committed women at the beginning of their academic careers and already managing heavy workloads, is a credit to those women.

In Australia, credit at an inter-institutional level is due to those who negotiated the successful collaborative project, The Inter-University Women's Studies Major. Courses were first available for this purpose in 1983 (Murdoch University) and 1984 (Deakin and Queensland Universities) so that one university could draw on another university's courses to develop its own specialization. The project enabled the three universities to overcome various obstacles in setting up these courses and at the same time to role-model the collaborative and cross-disciplinary characteristics of many women's studies courses (Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission, 1987).

Women distance educators are engaging in other initiatives which promise at least to challenge prejudices and assumptions and value the experience and needs of women. Some examples include a New South Wales course in building construction for mature rural women (Heiler & Richards, 1988b), British Columbian, Albertan and Australian courses in women's studies (Sturrock, 1988b; Rowland, 1982), and public discussions of conceptual and institutional problems and the potential of distance education (Coulter, 1989; Mani, 1988; von Prummer & Rossie, 1988; Mandie-Filer, 1988b). Other initiatives include using minority women's experiences as foci for new women's studies courses (Cox & James, 1988), and courses for women returning to technology-based jobs (Kirkup, 1986; Swarbrick, 1986) or seeking entry into management (Kirkup, 1988b).

Conclusion

The educational problems that all these initiatives address are daunting, not only for the students who suffer from them, but also for those educators who have the conviction and stamina to try and solve them. Feminist distance educators are helping to transform areas of their students' worlds, but they often have to do so in institutional contexts not entirely supportive of their values or methods. Their feminist colleagues in visual classrooms are providing support albeit

indirectly. It is time for closer cooperation. It is time too for some wider recognition:

Sometimes it seems as if we work all the time just to stay where we are. But in trying to do these things, even when we have lost, *we* have changed, we have changed others, and we have let loose a new spirit that will not go away. (Minnich, 1983, pp. 322)

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