Exploring Women's Experiences of Online Learning Using Photography and an Online Focus Group

Jennifer H. Kelland
University of Alberta, Canada

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Abstract: In this roundtable, I consider methodological questions about integrating photo-assisted interviews and an online focus group to examine women's experiences of learning online.

Since women make up the majority of online learners in Canada (TÉLUQ, n.d.; Carnevale, 2002, Athabasca University, 2005) and they are the target audience for many OLL programs (Kramarae, 2001), understanding their approaches to learning in this context, and determining whether or not they are successful is essential. Yet, the topic of gender and OLL has been receiving less attention from researchers in recent years (English, 2006), and the research that has been conducted often essentializes gender, assuming all women's experiences are similar (Gunn, McSporran, Macleod, & French, 2003). In this roundtable, I will discuss my research in progress, which examines how women construct knowledge in online learning (OLL) environments. Specifically, my research will examine the strategies women use to construct knowledge; how they came to use these strategies; the impact their strategies have on their learning experience; and the impact of their separation from other learners and the instructor, the structure of the OLL environment, and computer mediated communication on their strategies.

I approach this research from a feminist perspective, which values the diverse experiences of female learners; a social constructivist perspective, which recognizes that learning occurs through interactions between learners, content, and social systems; and a critical perspective, which questions how power relationships and social structures influence learning. Together these perspectives form a research framework that acknowledges that social interactions and social structures shape learners' experiences, and they provide tools for examining how learners interact with and in those structures. Within this theoretical framework, I will engage six to ten women in this exploration as they study in Canadian post-secondary OLL settings.

Initially, I will collect data face-to-face through photo-assisted interviews to establish a one-on-one interaction with each learner and to learn about their experiences as online learners. In this type of interviewing, participants are asked to take pictures that represent their experiences as online learners including, for example, images representing being an online learner, their relationships with other learners or instructors, their ideal situation for learning, the best part(s) of learning online and the worst part(s) of learning online. These pictures then form the basis for a conversation exploring how the learners construct knowledge in OLL contexts. Photo-assisted interviews lead to discussions of topics that are not easy to articulate like learners' metaphors about learning, and their perceptions of identity, social relationships, and alternate understandings of a situation while allowing learners to reflect on their experiences (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004; Hurworth, 2003; Taylor, 2002). This type of interview recognizes alternative ways of knowing and learning; it considers the learner's environment and experiences as part of their learning context and as part of the interview process; and it challenges traditional research approaches and social structures by allowing individual participants different ways of examining, validating and giving voice to their experiences (Frohmann, 2005).

Next, I will invite these women to participate in an asynchronous, online focus group where, as a group, they will reflect on their experiences as learners in a dynamic and collaborative analysis (Mann & Stewart, 2000). This component of the research will allow the participants to share their experiences of OLL, while allowing me to observe how they interact and how they implement their knowledge construction strategies in an online environment. This research approach also fits within my framework because it promotes community and connection among the participants as they co-create meaning through their online discussion. It also provides a forum for women to share their experiences outside of traditional academic structures, to consider the significance of those structures on their learning experiences and to give voice to their experiences through discussion and sharing their photographs.

I invited roundtable participants to respond to my research-in-progress and to consider emerging issues related to this research project by examining the following questions: How does using multiple methods (interviews and focus groups) and mediums (conversation, photos, online interactions) strengthen or weaken this research? How can my framework and these methods be more closely integrated? How does using OLL technology expand or limit the possibilities for critical feminist research?

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