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Women and Learning in an Online Environment
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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to examine women’s learning in an online environment. The study was an ethnographic investigation combined with discourse analysis of the textual interactions of women in a graduate introductory research class offered online. The findings reveal that women’s learning had unique patterns based on their perceptions of the online setting and on their sense of time, which was established by their other prioritized roles and responsibilities outside the class.

Purpose of the Study

Contemporary society is often called a “knowledge society,” which is characterized by technological development and distinguished from previous periods of history (Bereiter, 2002; Drucker, 1993). Education in this new era has been recognized as central to knowledge production, especially in providing lifelong learning to individuals so that they can deal with new information and new social roles in today’s knowledge society. Women’s social roles in this new society have been expanded beyond their traditional ones (Domosh & Seager, 2001). With multiple roles and changing vision, women have increased in population in both the workplace and in education. Even so, women are still an underrepresented group in society in general and in education in particular (Kramarae, 2001; Tompson, 2000; Hayes & Flannery, 2000; Stalker, 1996; Burge, 1998; Belenky et al., 1984).

Women have been the fastest growing group among the increasing numbers of enrollees in online courses in higher education. In fact, Burge (1998), examining women learners in distance learning settings, found that they prefer distance education courses. Kramarae (2001) examined women students enrolled in online programs and courses in particular and found that women outnumbered men. Kramarae attributed this fact to the multiple roles and responsibilities that have made women pursue more education to acquire the skills and knowledge they need to participate in a rapidly changing society. Given the increase in online courses in higher education and higher participation by women, the exploration of women’s learning in online learning environments is urgent and necessary. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine how these women learn in an online class and how the online environment influences their learning.

This study explored the mutual construction of gender and a learning place in an online environment. While the close relationship of women’s identities and learning have been studied in many disciplines, research regarding online learning settings in relation to women’s identities and learning has been rare. Thus, the study of women learners in online classes could not only help make women visible in higher education but it could also contribute to a more balanced discourse in adult education.

Theoretical Framework

This study was based on the learning theories of Dewey (1938), who advocated learning through experience, and Vygotsky (1978), who saw the importance of social contexts for individual learning. From Dewey, this study assumes that experience occurs through the interaction between self and any object, and that learning takes place through the interpretation and re-interpretation of experience. Learning is a particular experience, with its value directed toward human development and growth and is also social in nature in that it is mediated by the
use of signs as a social and cultural construct, and involves interactions with others (Dewey, 1938; Vygotsky; 1978).

To examine women’s learning experiences in an online class, this study was also grounded in Marxist and feminist geographers’ notion of “place” (Harvey, 1993, 1992; Domosh & Seager, 2001; McDowell & Sharp, 1997; McDowell, 1994). Place is the site that human life is grounded in and organizes the social norms and expectations that regulate particular roles and identities. Place becomes especially important when exploring women’s roles, experiences, and identities. While place is generally assumed to have physical dimensions, cyberspace—having no physical boundaries—has recently been considered an important site for human interactions, thus broadening the meaning of space and place (Hyun & Askov, 2004; Markham, 1998).

Additionally, the concept of “spatial behavior” provided a relevant frame for understanding women’s behaviors in this study of an online class. As such, Golledge and Stimson (1997) define human spatial behavior as “any sequence of consciously or subconsciously directed life processes that result in changes of location through time” (p. 155). This broad definition includes every possible human response to a natural or artificial environment—from “weakly motivated and random behaviors” to “problem-solving behaviors” to “repetitive learned behaviors” (pp. 155-156). Thus, women’s spatial behaviors in an online class would encompass their perceptions, decisions, actions or inactions, and reactions to the class in relation to their physical locations.

**Research Design**

This study used an ethnographic approach to investigate the interrelationship of women’s learning and an online learning environment which is a cultural site where a unique culture is constructed by the class structure and the interactions of the participants. These interactions were the unit of analysis in this study. The ethnographic field of the online class was an introductory graduate research course offered in spring 2003. The class used WebCT Course Management System, which provides various communication tools such as bulletin boards and emails for asynchronous communications and chat rooms for synchronous communications. The participants in the study were the instructor, two teaching associates, and 16 students enrolled in the course. The data sources consisted of bulletin board postings, chat logs, email correspondences between the instructor and the students, and interviews of several of the women. The researcher participated in the class as a teaching associate and observed the “verbal behaviors” of the participants in their online exchanges through bulletin boards and chat rooms (Quine & Ullian, 1970). The researcher also interviewed seven women by phone or face to face to understand their perceptions of the learning place, their motivations, intentions, and their reflections on their actions and reactions to others in the class.

This study also used discourse analytic strategies to identify linguistic forms and patterns in relation to the meaning of the texts and the stance of the speaker or writer (Fairclough, 1995). In an ethnographic study, language is an important lens through which to understand human activities (Vygotsky, 1978; Broduieu, 1971; Thomas, 1993; Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The analysis of language use focused on identifying various patterns such as topic continuity or shifts, linguistic cohesion, tense and aspect marking, affective and epistemic marking, speakership and turn-taking.
Findings

The primary research question of the study was: How are women constructed and reconstructed in an online learning place? This question was subdivided into these questions: (1) What is the nature of an online learning environment? (2) Who are the women learners in the online class in this study, and why did they choose an online program? (3) How do these women perceive an online learning setting and how does it influence their behaviors?

In terms of the nature of the online environment, the class as a neutral “space” turned into a particular “place” for learning as the participants formed a communal place where they felt more comfortable. The participants interacted by posting texts on the online bulletin boards, and exchanging texts in a chat room or by emails. Texts as interaction media became the embodied presence of the individual women students. Contexts for interactions were developed from the posted texts. The following example illustrates how contexts emerged through these interactions (all names are fictitious except the researcher’s name):

Example 1. Contexts, Emerging and Flowing

Introduction: Jonathan Weber

126. Jonathan Weber (Sat, Jan. 18, 2003, 11:00)
128. Kyungmi Hyun (Sat, Jan. 18, 2003, 13:52)
133. Jonathan Weber (Sun, Jan. 19, 2003, 10:49)
137. Sandra Hicks (Sun, Jan. 19, 2003, 15:27)
140. Jonathan Weber (Mon, Jan. 20, 2003, 06:38)
156. Sandra Hicks (Tue, Jan. 21, 2003, 19:05)
145. Carol Goldberg (Mon, Jan. 20, 2003, 12:19)

132. Kim Edwards (Sun, Jan. 19, 2003, 10:09)
134. Jonathan Weber (Sun, Jan. 19, 2003, 10:58)

(Threads of communication in Unit 1 Bulletin Board)

This example of threaded postings shows how the others reacted to Jonathan’s initial posting. The alignment of each posting indicates who is reacting to which posting. As marked by the three different colors, Jonathan’s posting was developed into three different topics which were all relevant to what he introduced about himself. The information that Jonathan gave, that is where he lives and what he does, provides an immediate communicative context in which others can join and make it rich. Also, by responding selectively to a particular topic, the respondents themselves develop further contexts that others can join. Therefore, the textual contexts are constantly flowing and always in progress.

The constructive dimension of textual interactions was also found in the facilitating nature of online settings. The permanence and visibility of posted texts on the bulletin boards established “proper” patterns of behavior and preserved the interactions as feedback pools. Therefore, the online class was also constructed as a communal place not only through structured activities set by the course objectives and requirements but also through the participants’
structuring activities through their selections of how they acted in the online class. While
perceiving the program and course goals, individuals aligned their personal goals with them.
Students tried to move together by setting the pace and by reaching a certain consensus in their
discussions. Some unique patterns were found in women’s behaviors, such as initiating,
responding to others, and waiting for others’ input. The following example illustrates how an
initiation occurred:

Example 2. Women’s Initiating Actions.

351. Sandra Hicks (Sun, Jan. 26, 2003, 21:26)
Hi Team! Ok - I admit it, I've gotten compulsive today! I read the ten articles and tried to make a
chart that categorizes the articles by research design. I tried to capture a question that captures the
intent of the study and jotted down a few thoughts that evaluate the meaning, strengths or weaknesses
of the articles. …
(Sandra’s posting from Research Critique Team 1 Bulletin Board. Boldface added.)

This posting exemplifies how an initiation is made and what its intention is. Here, the
adjective, “compulsive” reflects the situation in relation to the issue of time. Sandra’s reading
and analysis were finished half a month earlier than the course schedule. While the women’s
initiating behaviors launch a group to get on task, these behaviors set the work pace that the team
follows. Taking advantage of the benefit of online courses that allow women to participate
“anytime” and “anywhere,” the women operated in “women’s time” in which they have cannot
delay their work to the last minute but must do it ahead of time because of the priorities of their
other responsibilities.

The women in the class were homogeneous by race and social class. They were all white,
middle class Americans. Also, these women students had prioritized their lives with family and
work being first in relation to their studies, which came second. In choosing an online program to
pursue their master’s studies, the women in the class negotiated their other roles and
responsibilities.

Example 3. Prioritized Choices

I do it by choice. I mean, well, some by choice. If I force my husband into- um, I mean I could force
him and say, you know what? I’m not moving with you because I’m not going to give up my job. And
we would have to negotiate that. And I probably could force him to not travel as much, but you know,
the cost of [changing] his job would be severe, you know, so I mean I suppose we could re-negotiate
but the way I have negotiated it, it's all mine. It's all of the family [responsibility] falls to my
shoulders.
(Excerpt from the interview with Dorrie. Boldface and underlining added.)

This excerpt illustrates how women students negotiate their multiple roles and
responsibilities. While teaching six online courses every semester is her job, Dorrie is also
deeply involved with her three daughters who are in high school and college. Since Dorrie’s
husband is usually away during the weekdays with his job, she alone manages her time and
energy in order to teach, take care of their daughters, and pursue her graduate study. She
repeated the use of the quantifier “all,” emphasizing the amount of the responsibility that she has
to take on. Despite the enormous amount of her responsibility and her family’s frequent moves,
Dorrie stresses that she takes on her responsibilities “by choice,” though not all of them. Dorrie
views women’s roles at home as central and other roles as simply additional to those at home.
Most women make strategic choices in which study often becomes the last choice, and at a more manageable time. Thus, the time when their children are grown would be the natural time for many women to decide to go back to school.

In terms of learning, for the women in the class, external rewards became primary motivations for their choices and further influenced their internal motivations for learning. The women in the class sought the authority of knowledge while maintaining their feminine roles at home. The women in the class practiced equality as a norm of behavior, taking their share of responsibilities and recognizing the equal contributions of others. In terms of the outcome of their learning, the women’s feminine roles at home remained much the same, while they developed new knowledge, attitudes, and visions through their master’s studies. One of the women interviewed described her vision:

Example 4. Changes

I feel very excited that there ought to be lots of good places for me to be able to work, and I’m excited about everything that I’ve been learning that I think I would be happy doing any of it. I took a literacy course in the fall, and I would like to be involved in local education efforts like that, and I have dreamed about working for UNESCO for one of the world health organizations, trying to work in the Third World in combining adult education and my interest in community education, and I have a good background in public health and environmental protection, and I think so much of the world needs that kind of help.

(Excerpt from the first interview with Sandra. Boldface added.)

The learning experience occurs on the continuum of previous experience and always brings personal growth (Dewey, 1938). The women’s learning in the online class and in the adult education program led them to interpret the world in which they are located with a new perspective. Sandra’s experience showed that her interests went beyond her personal life to the people in her community and in other countries. The class also seemed to help women reinterpret what they could do in their positions with their own skills and experience.

Implications

The findings of this study have several implications for adult education theory and practice. First, online programs offer a new opportunity for women to achieve the master’s degree. However, at the same time, online master’s programs may serve as a social mechanism for maintaining the women’s social roles at home. While the women in this study acted as equal participants to the males in terms of their roles in group work, they embraced their traditional feminine roles at home. Their choice of online programs was the result of their negotiations with other prioritized roles at home and at work. Second, the knowledge they achieved in an academic discipline (rather than their personal experiences and skills) may be an important tool for the women to demonstrate who they are and what they can do in the sphere of paid work. The high achievement of course requirements seemed to reinforce the women’s confidence and self-esteem. Third, the social aspects of external rewards such as earning a degree or certificate (rather than the maturity of the learners) may be important factors influencing the women’s choices and their internal motivations. The women seemed to believe that their external rewards would be in becoming more marketable in their current or future career choices. Fourth, while online delivery of education has extended learning opportunities to many women, these new opportunities still seem confined to a certain group by race and social class.
References


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