ATHABASCA UNIVERSITY

WOMEN, DISTANCE EDUCATION AND SOLITUDE:

A FEMINIST POSTMODERN NARRATIVE OF WOMEN'S RESPONSES

TO LEARNING IN SOLITUDE

BY

LESLIE WALL

A thesis submitted to the

Athabasca University Governing Council in partial fulfillment

Of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

Athabasca, Alberta

(May), (2004)

ATHABASCA UNIVERSITY

The undersigned certify that they have read and recommend to the Athabasca University Governing Council for acceptance a thesis "WOMEN, DISTANCE EDUCATION AND SOLITUDE: A FEMINIST POSTMODERN NARRATIVE OF WOMEN'S RESPONSES TO LEARNING IN SOLITUDE" by LESLIE WALL in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF DISTANCE EDUCATION.

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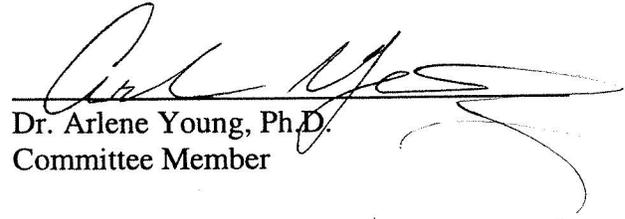
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DEDICATION

To my Mother.

This is my solitude. Koller (1990) explained:

I do not cloak it among other persons, and I know how it appears. No sign of submission, in the eyes of men; too assured, in the view of most women; not properly respectful, to the gaze of all those in authority. I have become that third gender: a human person, the being one creates of oneself. I fell in love with my work, became fiercely protective of my freedom, started to make new rules. In this Sartre is surely right: persons are not born but made. The choice lies escapably within ourselves: we may let it wither away, or we may take it and run. (p. 23)

ABSTRACT

There is the feminist assumption that connections and relations are the primary method of learning for women as opposed to solitary knowledge-building. In spite of the many articles that assert that distance education is an isolating experience for women, the literature review has also shown that some women learners are not interested in connections/relations, but prefer to study in solitude, and did not experience any negative influences on their learning as a result. The association of solitude, connected learning, and women needs further investigation. Using a postmodern framework, the purpose of my study is to explore the notion of solitude among women distance education students, in contrast to the feminist view that women have a high need for interaction.

Chapter One begins with my experiences as a graduate distance education student. Chapter Two looks at the literature from earlier ideas about the principle method of learning for women to more current research that questions this assumption. Chapter Three discusses the research methodology that utilizes journals as the way of acquiring personal experiences about studying in solitude. Chapter Four presents the themes that emerged from the participants' experiences, and Chapter Five sums up studying in solitude as a way of knowing. I begin this thesis in solitude and I hope that it ends in community. By writing our personal stories, perhaps the readers may recognize their own stories.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A sincere thank-you to the women who participated in this research, and for their willingness in sharing their stories so openly. They helped in opening the doors to a new way of thinking about distance education.

I am extremely indebted to the Thesis Committee members—Marti Cleveland-Innes, Arlene Young, and Jonathan Baggaley—for giving me the opportunity to express my own "truth." I am grateful to Arlene Young for her expertise and guidance in the beginning as she coached me towards the direction that I wanted to go, and to Marti Cleveland-Innes for her patience and motivational proverbs that kept me going until the end. I appreciate the willingness of Jonathan Baggaley for his courage in joining me on this trailblazing journey.

Not to be excluded is Athabasca University and staff. This dream would not have been possible without their kindness, support, and generosity.

A special thanks to my husband who gave me his unconditional love and support, while I pursued my educational goal.

I also wish to acknowledge my friends and family, Kyra (my equine partner), and Sir Duke and Valentino (my canine friends) for patiently standing by while I took a detour out of their lives to pursue my goal.

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CHAPTER ONE

Nothing worse could happen to one than to be completely understood.

C. G. JUNG

This research is based on the idea that there are some women distance education

learners who, in addition to learning in a collaborative environment, have the skills and

confidence to learn in a solitary environment, and that learning in solitude is not as

detrimental as some authors contend. This research is born out of the need to discuss the

subject of solitude in distance education, to consider the possibility that it is ok to learn in

solitude, and to determine if there is a community of learners who have similar thoughts,

feelings, and preferences towards learning independently and/or collaboratively. Through

multiple voices and direct quotations from participants' journal writings, this research

documented the experiences of ten women learners in two graduate distance education

courses about their perceptions of solitude and collaborative study.

OVERVIEW OF THIS PROJECT

Two things that always caught my attention throughout my studies in the Master of

Distance Education program, and throughout my literature review in that program, was the

continual repetition of the idea that the primary method of learning and teaching for

women is by way of connection, relations, and collaboration, and the constant requirement

to participate in computer conferencing and group projects. I did not "connect" to the

concept of learning by collaboration and hence I always felt "different." I started to feel

that there was something wrong with me; that I was not capable of learning in the way the

experts were saying I should learn. I have learned well on my own, through life's ups and

downs, and through different life stages. I also learn from groups, or other individuals,

but I tend to act as an independent learner. Other authors and other learners have

indicated to me that they also enjoy the solitude needed for working on projects, needing

the concentration with minimal interference, without the need for on-going interaction and

collaboration. Secondly, I experienced a lot of frustration with conferencing, technology,

and group work. I noticed that there were times during the course of our collaborative

projects where others had expressed similar frustrations. Comments were woven in

amongst our discussions relative to these frustrations. Remarks such as "I'm drowning

with the other strong comments;" "I prefer to work alone;" "I used to wonder if it was my

personality that made group work so distasteful to me, and to some extent it was, but

several people I know have expressed their preferences to work alone or in partnership,

too;" and "should be an option rather than a requirement (whenever possible)," aroused

my own curiosity about studying in solitude without the need for constant interaction and

group work, espoused by feminists and instructors alike.

Preferring to study in solitude, I found it overwhelming to constantly participate in

computer conferencing and group projects. I felt intimidated as I read the numerous

messages contributed from those who, it seemed, had no difficulty in finding something to

say. For the most part, I contributed because I had to, not because I wanted to. Computer

conferences were structured in such a way that I had to spend time reflecting on answers

to topics that I had no interest in. There were times when I didn't have a clue what to say,

so had to spend time researching an answer just so I could get my marks. This was

frustrating because it took up valuable time.

These findings prompted me to investigate learning in solitude and learning collaboratively. This thesis is also prompted by my observations of, and experiences with, "social isolation" (Krajnc, 1988) in distance education, which did not seem to have any negative effects on my learning, and I did not experience any negative personal consequences.

I am working in solitude as I undertake this thesis. I have my own room and enjoy this precious little time of quiet reflection for my own soul searching and the enjoyment of writing a thesis on this neglected topic. I have a personal interest in the area of solitude. Perhaps studying in solitude can provide a physical and mental space for the learners to escape from daily work and/or family responsibilities for quiet contemplation. For others, potential creativity and productivity may begin to emerge while studying in solitude.

INTENT OF THE STUDY

Utilizing a postmodern framework, the intent of this study was to research the effects of isolation on learning. It is designed to get more information about how women feel about studying in solitude. It explores the notion of solitude among female distance education students, in contrast to the views of some feminist writers that women have a high need for interaction.

Potential volunteers were approached and asked to provide me with some thoughts about their need or wish for solitude in learning. Those that responded were asked to journal their experiences with solitude while they were studying. This combination of e-mail conversations and journal data is the "voice" data used to present their experiences with solitude and interaction.

A postmodern perspective provides a valuable portrayal of women's experiences in an attempt to obtain new knowledge and understandings about women studying in solitude. A postmodern framework is suitable because the relationship between studying in solitude and distance education has not been researched in depth. Consequently, the participant's experiences with solitude can begin to build a foundation for future feminist qualitative inquiry to get a more complete picture of solitude and interaction. Gaskell (1987) maintained that "feminist research must not start from the knowledge of 'experts' but from the standpoint of ordinary individuals" (p. 396).

<div align="center">STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM</div>

This project was created out of the need to discuss the subject of "isolation." However, I use the term solitude because it has a more favourable concept—it is the interrelationship between engagement and disengagement among people, it stands in relationship to connection, while "isolation" tends to mean alienation and loneliness. If solitude is viewed as a separate entity (rather than a balance between solitude and connection), it is more likely to be viewed as an "isolating" experience and, therefore, looked at negatively. I use the terms "interaction," "connection," and "collaboration," interchangeably throughout this thesis in reference to solitude. Even though they have different meanings they are closely related.

I think that being "alone" is an everyday experience for many women. I wanted to write something for those "solitary" women to say that being alone is not about "ghettoisation" (Grace, 1991). They can feel comfortable being alone, and it can be a positive step towards developing personal qualities, such as self-knowledge and learning, to become more independent and self-sufficient.

I recall a lot of dissension in one of my courses about collaboration and group work. There were a few who did not want to do the team thing. If this is the case, then this is one area where some women's needs are not being met. Are women just passively agreeing to the feminist process of interaction? I wanted to share my experiences with and perceptions about solitude and collaborative learning in distance education, and I wanted to hear from other women learners about their experiences with solitude and their thoughts about collaborative learning, rather than second-hand knowledge from authors as outlined in the literature review. Although it was difficult to narrow this topic to one question, my research question is: How do other women feel about studying in solitude and the requirement to interact as part of the course process?

<div align="center">DISCUSSION OF KEY CONCEPTS AND TERMS</div>

<u>Distance Education</u>

There are many definitions of distance education and feminist pedagogy, none of which include anything specific about solitude or isolation, but generally refer to the necessity of technology to bridge the physical separation gap between learners, and learners and instructors. For example, Smith & Norlen (1994) defined distance education accordingly,

> Distance education can be interpreted broadly as teaching at a distance. 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, teleconferencing, mail,

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fax, E-mail or one-on-one telephone interaction between learner and teacher. (p. 31)

Although there are a variety of definitions of distance education, common denominators 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" (Smith & Norlen, 1994, p. 31).

Moore (1990) also addressed physical separation and technology, defining distance education as ". . . the geographic separation between learner and instructor is such that electronic or print communications media have to be employed to transmit the dialogue" (p. 12).

However, there are definitions that describe distance education as both an independent and connected learning environment that would be suitable operational definitions for this study and can also be applied to feminist pedagogy. For example, Keegan (1986) communicated that:

> A major function of distance systems is to achieve the difficult synthesis between interaction and independence—getting the mixture right. All learning in a distance system is achieved by a balance between the learning activities the student carried out independently and those which involve interaction with other people. The balance between the two is the crucial issue facing distance study systems. (p. 93).

Gough (1981) looked at the option of choice for the distance learner and proposed that:

> Distance education is a means of providing learning experiences for students through the use of self-instructional materials and access to educational resources,

the use of which is largely determined by the student and which allow the student,

for the most part, to choose the time, place and circumstances of learning. (p. 10)

Solitude

For me solitude is stillness and quiet, a time to experience my own senses and

thoughts. It is a time for me to retreat from the noise of the world and the affects of

others' truths encircling me. I can be myself. Solitude gives me strength. No intrusions.

No demands. I feel free. Solitude gives me the opportunity to grow as an individual. It

allows me to explore the depths of my soul. I do enjoy being with people and I do like to

share my experiences, but not constantly. Being with people all the time does not help me

grow as an individual. Solitude is also about simplicity. It helps me get grounded—to

reinforce my values. Solitude helps me revisit who I am. As far as the relation between

solitude and distance education is concerned, I do not "feel in solitude." Connection with

other learners and instructors is there when I need it. However, the barrier of the

computer and monitor prohibit a "feeling" of connection and interaction.

A definition of solitude that is associated with distance education, and comes close

to the concept of solitude as connection and disengagement, is in a study by Dickie

(1999). One respondent explained that even though an individuals' experience is not

focused on other people, but absorbed in solitary projects, it is usually structured by an

implicit sense of containment in some human community. Based on this understanding,

the following discussion of solitude will explain that solitude is both connection and

disengagement, while isolation and loneliness are primarily disengagement from others.

Solitude is an experiential state and differs in that no other people are involved—

"a state in which our experience is disengaged from other people" (Koch, 1990, p. 186),

and "when we are in touch with ourselves and temporarily unaffected by others' needs and wants" (Kottler, 1990, p. 18). Koch (1990) communicated that solitude offers certain intrinsic values, which he refers to as the intrinsic virtues of solitude: "freedom of action, centeredness, attunement to nature, reflective perspective, and creativity" (p. 200). These are all especially important for women. The virtues of solitude are balanced and completed by corresponding virtues of encounter.

Christian-Smith (1993) described the importance of solitude for women and summarized her experience with solitude shaping her "many selves." Pagano (1993) journaled the relationship she found between solitude and connection. "I can be alone because I know that I am connected. The world does not face when I am in solitude because it is only in the world and in my connection to others in it that I am myself" (p. xiv).

Storr (1988) believed that solitude is as important as the interpersonal in making sense of relationships, fostering creative imagination, and as a preparation for a life of action. "The capacity to be alone thus becomes linked with self-discovery and self-realization, with becoming aware of ones' deepest needs, feelings, and impulses" (Storr, 1988, p. 21).

Solitude is not necessarily the same as physical separation and should not be confused with loneliness. The terms "loneliness" and "alienation" burden solitude with negative meanings. The term "isolation" seems to be associated with loneliness and separation from others, while creativity, reflectivity and connection are associated with solitude. Since the term "solitude" has a more positive quality, and for purposes of this

paper, the term "solitude" will be used and not used interchangeably with the term "isolation."

Silence

I have included a brief discussion of silence because being in solitude means being silent (unless someone is talking out loud to themselves) and does not mean that they are mute or dumb, but are actively engaged in their projects pausing from connection with others. Solitude/silence teaches us to learn how to listen to our inner voices or inner speech. "Silence is the absence of speech not to be confused with muteness/dumbness, which is the incapacity for speech" (Howard & Howard, 1998). Burge (1993) explained that "relaxed silences in small or large groups may help the learner to integrate ideas and feelings, as well as think of questions to ask" (p. 6).

Silence has different significances and uses in different cultures. Schweickart, (1996) explained, for example, that Filipinos appreciate silence and associate it with wisdom and thoughtfulness—silence is a necessary moment of all knowledge projects. "What is culturally variable is less the role of silence but the value given to in relation to speech. Western culture and western theories of discourse *erroneously* overvalue speech" (p. 324).

Silence can also occur in abusive situations; that is, being unwilling or unable to speak: forced silence. Silence can mean isolation from others, being cut off from the women's own mind and its development, as well as keeping a lid on feelings. Women learn to be silent for self-protection. From an abuse-related perspective, Belenky et al. (1986) described the silent knower as feeling stupid, inarticulate, and powerless, who believes she is mindless, incapable of knowing, unable to learn, and having no voice; that

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is, women's subordination. In contrast, Mahoney (1996) suggested that silence can be

understood as an avenue to power and can be seen, the same as "voice," just as complex

and multidimensional. Not necessarily related to the silence of victimization, women have

the choice to be silent. "But this choice is not usually available to women, and voluntary

silence may be not interpreted as such" (Sutton, 1994, p. 507).

For the purposes of this study, it is important to know the difference between

silence resulting from abuse, or retreating into silence as an important psychological space

of resistance and negotiation (Mahoney, 1996)--a space where she can locate her own

voice and feel free to express it.

<u>Interaction</u>

Interaction is included in this paper because of the different types and levels of

interaction and its connection to solitude. Interaction need not be confined to computer

conferencing, telephone tutorials, or a two-way conversation with another person (or

persons). Key forms of interaction can also occur through exchange of written materials

such as journals designed to create dialogue between the student and instructor, or a

personal journal just for the individual, e-mail, fax, learning evaluations, or interaction

with text "a silent but active participant" (Juler, 1990, p. 27), or when a "solitary and silent

student mulls over the 'knowables' in a text he is reading" (Daniel & Marquis, 1979, p.

30).

The following definitions explain types and levels of interaction. Moore (1989,

p.101) identified three types of interaction:

Learner-content interaction is interaction between the learner and the content or

subject of study where the process of intellectually interacting with content results

in changes in the learner's understanding, the learner's perspective, or the
cognitive structures of the learner's mind.

Learner-instructor interaction is interaction between the learner and the expert
who prepared the subject material, or some other expert acting as instructor.

Learner-learner interaction is inter-learner interaction be between one learner
and other learners, alone or in group settings, with or without the real-time
presence of an instructor.

Fuhrmann and Jacobs (cited in Cranton, 1992, p. 43) proposed three interaction styles:

Dependence refers to the learner's expectation that the educator is primarily
responsible for the learning that occurs.

Collaboration refers to the learner's expectation that the responsibility for
learning should be shared by learners and educator.

Independence refers to the learner's expectation that he or she will set and attain
individual goals.

Riechmann and Grasha (1974, p. 221) defined independence, dependence and
collaboration as follows:

The **independent** learner likes to think for themselves and prefers to work on their
own, but will listen to the ideas of others in the classroom. They feel the content is
important and is confident in their learning abilities.

The **dependent** learner shows little intellectual curiosity and learns only what is
required. They see teachers and peers as sources of structure and want to be told
what to do.

The **collaborative** learner learns most by sharing their ideas and talent, and sees

the classroom as a place for social interaction, as well as content learning.

Postmodernism

The term postmodernism refers to the cultural changes seen as part of the

development of a 'postcolonial', 'postindustrial' society (Hughes, 1995). It relates to:

> . . .a relatively widespread mood in literary theory, philosophy and the social
>
> sciences concerning the inability of these disciplines to delivery totalising theories
>
> and doctrines, or enduring 'answers' to fundamental dilemmas and puzzles posed
>
> by objects of enquiry, and a growing feeling, on the contrary, that a chronic
>
> provisionality, plurality of perspectives and incommensurable appearances of the
>
> object of enquiry in competing discourses make the search for ultimate answers or
>
> even answers that can command widespread consensus a futile exercise (Boyne &
>
> Rattansi, 1990, pp.11-12).

Richardson (1994) explained:

> The core of postmodernism is the *doubt* that any method or theory, discourse or
>
> genre, tradition or novelty, has a universal and general claim as the "right" or the
>
> privileged form of authoritative knowledge. Postmodernism *suspects* all truth
>
> claims of masking and serving particular interests in local, cultural, and political
>
> struggles. (p. 517)

For instance, "postmodernism would question the assumption that researchers are to take

an objective stance toward their research, or that the proper way to write a textbook

chapter (or research paper) is in an objective, third person voice" (Dewar, 1997, p. 361).

Postmodernism sees "knowledge as taking numerous forms and as unique to particular people or specific locales" and that research "can never do more than describe, with all descriptions equally valid" (Neuman, 2000, p. 84). The value of postmodern research is in "telling a story that may stimulate experiences within the people who read or encounter it" (Neuman, 2000, p. 84). Neuman (2000, p. 84) summarized postmodern social research as follows:

- Rejection of all ideologies and organized belief systems, including all social theory

- Strong reliance on intuition, imagination, personal experience, and emotion.

- Sense of meaninglessness and pessimism, believe that the world will never improve.

- Extreme subjectivity in which there is not distinction between the mental and the external world.

- Ardent relativism in which there are infinite interpretations, none superior to another.

- Espousal of diversity, chaos, and complexity that is constantly changing.

- Rejection of studying the past or different places since only the here and now is relevant.

- Belief that causality cannot be studied because life is too complex and rapidly changing.

- Assertion that research can never truly represent what occurs in the social world.

Postmodernism is anything but straightforward. It is complex and does not appear to have a clear-cut aesthetic and philosophical ideology. It relinquishes certainty, stability, and finality (Blake, 1998). Furthermore, postmodern feminism goes beyond the

constraints of any set or fixed identity (Blake, 1998), and is often associated with a revolt against authority and significations and seeks to recover humanism. Postmodern feminism "criticizes and attempts to unsettle authoritative, hegemonic definitions and pathways of interpretation. Embraces an intellectual ethos of openness, fluidity, play, and surprise. Movement and change are privileged over closure and certainty" (Blake, 1998, p. 4). Postmodernism offers "feminist opportunities to avoid dogmatism and reductionism of single-cause analysis, and to produce knowledge from which to act" (Lather, 1991, p. 39).

<u>Feminist Research</u>

Feminist researchers use multiple techniques to capture women's subjective experience, placing primacy on acknowledging and validating female experience (Wilkinson, 1986). A feminist methodology attempts to give voice to women and to correct the male-oriented perspective that has predominated in the development of social science (Neuman, 2000). Feminist researchers interact and collaborate with the people of their studies, attempting to "comprehend an interviewees experiences while sharing their own feelings and experiences" (Neuman, 2000, p. 83) which creates a nonhierarchical and nonthreatening environment. Neuman cited the following characteristics of feminist social research:

- Advocacy of a feminist value position and perspective.
- Rejection of sexism in assumptions, concepts and research questions.
- Creation of emphatic connections between the researcher and those he or she studies.

- Sensitivity to how relations of gender and power permeate all spheres of social life.

- Incorporation of the researchers personal feelings and experiences into the research process.

- Flexibility in choosing research techniques and crossing boundaries between academic fields.

- Recognition of the emotional and mutual-dependence dimensions in human experience.

- Action-oriented research that facilitate personal and societal change.

Based on the brief discussions of postmodernism and feminist research, the following examples show how feminists have utilized a feminist postmodern framework in their work. For example, Blake (1998) developed and integrated a variety of feminist theories (including postmodern feminism) into her introductory women's studies curriculum to demonstrate the richness and rigor of feminist discourse in order to broaden the students' mind because of the importance to their individual academic success as well as to society. Lather (1991) offered a feminist analysis of higher education in relation to postmodernism. She wanted to find out if the students in her introductory women's studies classes were resisting her teaching. Her "voice" data incorporated a multi-genre approach that included journals kept by her students during the course, interviews done after journal writings and analysis, research reports, and her own insights/musings collected over the course of the inquiry (Lather, 1991). The structuring tactic used to write up this empirical work was to tell four different "stories" about the data: realist, critical, deconstructive, and reflective (Lather, 1991).

Dewar's (1997) intuition prompted her to write about women's experiences in adult education within a postmodern perspective. Feeling uncomfortable with some feminist writing and uneasy about the "proper way to represent knowledge" (Dewar, 1997, p. 361), her "voice" data collection consisted of a combination of e-mail conversations interspersed with perspectives from other writers in the field, along with her own thoughts to illuminate the many perspectives of women in adult education. Her doctoral dissertation focused on women's experiences with graduate degrees in adult education. This dissertation demonstrated a self-reflexivity and multi-genre approach to gathering women's voices using a combination of individual and collaborative autobiographies, real and imaginary dialogue, circles of learning, narrative, fictional representation, stories, deconstruction, and poetry, in which to represent her research project (Dewar, 1996).

<u>LIMITATIONS</u>

Reflective journals cannot be systematically replicated because knowledge is acquired through personal experience. Although these experiences may not be representative of other women learners registered in distance education, there may be some learners who do recognize themselves in similar situations. Women's experiences cannot be generalized throughout the population because " . . . the collective exploration of experience leads not to a common knowledge and solidarity based on sameness, but to the tensions of an articulation of difference" (Weiler, 1991, p. 469).

This study has not explored cultural imperatives and implications relative to studying in solitude, nor has it explored undergraduate students who study at a distance. Furthermore, since researching the topic of solitude has barely begun, the relatively small sample population prohibits an accurate statistical analysis of the positive or negative

experiences of studying in solitude. Continual research contributions of women's "less

interactive" experiences could provide the foundation for future research about solitude

based on a statistical study, using both quantitative and qualitative data, to get a more

thorough picture of the benefits and/or the negatives of studying in solitude.

DELIMITATIONS

I chose women rather than men for my study because it was the women in my

classes who were outspoken about their feelings towards interaction, collaborative work,

and conferencing. I chose not to use the word "isolation" in this study because it is viewed

as having a negative impact on women learners in the distant learning environment, and is

more associated with disengagement from others. I chose to use the term "solitude"

because it is a balance between disengagement and connection with others.

Studying in solitude is a vast topic that can cover many aspects in distance

education such as the pedagogical significance of studying in solitude, the procedural

aspect of interaction, how much interaction is enough to satisfy the requirements of

graduate studies, preference for more or less interaction, and so on. My decision was to

focus on women learners who are capable of, or chose to learn independently, in contrast

to the feminist expectation of learning interactively.

SUMMARY

This study emerged out of my growing scepticism that collaborative learning is

the primary method of learning for women, the accepted notion that learning in "isolation"

is unsuitable for women, and the imposition of ongoing conferencing and group work,

based on the assumption that women learners need more interaction for effective learning.

What appears to be the acceptable way of learning has been challenged by some women who do not need to learn primarily in a collaborative environment.

Learning primarily by connection did not make sense to me. I assumed that women were capable of learning in a variety of contexts in distance education. But it seemed that in order to mimic a face-to-face classroom, it was necessary to build a community of togetherness through ongoing conferencing and group work. However, I have learned that conferencing and group work are not a necessary condition of learning for all women students. I wanted to explore that reality with other women students in a distance education program. What follows is the literature review that begins with the customary views of connection, followed by more current trends, and optimistic views, about learning in solitude.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

There is much emphasis in the research on connection and collaboration in distance education, but little appears to have been studied regarding solitary experience and distance education. Given that distance education does involve learning in a solitary environment, a key factor then for diminishing assumed feelings of isolation, particularly for women, is the mission for distance educators to ensure that learning takes place in an interactive environment. Any requirement for interaction in distance education may not take into consideration individual differences and preferences for learning either interactively, or alone, or a balance of both. However, there are a few published studies that do provide insight into solitary learning, revealing some disagreements with some feminist pedagogy emphasizing the importance of connective and collaborative learning. This chapter begins with research that discusses the tensions between the concepts of learning in solitude and learning collaboratively, and concludes with research that supports the case for solitude in distance education.

ISOLATION

Although distance education appears to be suitable for the needs of women, this form of learning may contribute even further to women's isolation and confinement in the home (Coulter, 1989; Faith & Coulter, 1988). Thus, studying at home may reinforce the "ghettoisation" (Grace, 1991) of women in the domestic domain. There is no getting away from the fact that isolation is a major factor of distance education and, unfortunately, it is one of the factors that has formed the basis of criticisms like those of Faith and

Coulter. Yet, as Faith and Coulter conclude, distance education also appears well suited for women, who for economic, family, geographical, and employment reasons, need to study at home. To diminish the feelings of isolation, then, is one role and goal of distance educators is to encourage interaction and connection between learners and instructors and other learners. Increasingly, that interaction is by way of technology such as e-mail and computer conferencing, and in particular, for female learners by way of the feminist principles of connection through group work and collaboration (MacKeracher, 1994). On the other hand, if they choose to study at home, rather than attending the classroom, they may not feel isolated.

Past research in Great Britain and Germany viewed isolation as a barrier for women studying at a distance. Kirkup and von Prummer (1990) found evidence that "the female 'independent' learner does not enjoy or benefit from isolation" (p. 30). Some research, on the other hand, has shown that not all female learners react negatively towards learning in isolation, nor did women experience any negative influences on their learning as a result (May, 1993). Bray (1988) acknowledged isolation issues yet found that "not all women students experience distance learning as isolating because they work outside of their homes" (p. 43). May (1992) found that women associated isolation with negative personal circumstances. Yet, these women argued that they were not isolated and lonely because the majority of them "either worked outside the home or were busy in community service groups, therefore contended that they were not house-bound. Working and participating in activities outside the home further discredited, in these women's eyes, the argument that distance study contributed towards women's isolation and confinement in their home" (p. 128).

Krajnc (1988) noted that typical of most of the studies about social isolation in distance education was that it "was almost always observed and interpreted as a negative influence on education and learning. Nothing good or positive was ever expected to result from it" (p. 3). Furthermore,

> Learning in social isolation through distance study has more rarely been observed from a positive point of view, than from the point of view of its negative consequences. For this reason planners in distance studies most frequently try to eliminate social isolation from education to the greatest possible degree. So far there are not positive data on the optimal proportion of social isolation in any one model of adult education. (p. 12)

This still appears to be the case. During my search of the literature, I also noticed that research on isolation in distance education is limited to specifically examining women's experiences. The topic of isolation is generally followed by the suggestion and recommendation that future research investigate the effects of isolation on learning more in-depth (Dickie, 1999; May, 1992, 1994; Hayes & Flannery, 1997). Thus, this project was produced as a follow up to this recommendation. I believe that the reasons for not seriously investigating the subject of isolation is because of the emphasis of some feminist pedagogical theories on "connection," "interaction," and "collaboration" (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Noddings, 1984).

<u>CONNECTION</u>

Feminist pedagogy most often emphasizes learning based on such principles as "collaboration," "connection," "relations," and "interaction" (Kirkup & von Prummer, 1990; Burge, 1990; Burge & Lenskyj, 1990). Furthermore, "women's need for non-

authoritarian, non-coercive, cooperative learning, and for interactive learning processes

leading to consciousness-raising and social action, are consistent themes throughout the

feminist writing on education" (Coulter, 1989, p. 14). MacKeracher (1994) found that

women tend to prefer learning in ways that "allows for the sharing of knowledge derived

from personal experience" (p. 80), connection with other learners, and focusing on

collaborative initiatives even in individualized learning situations. The emphasis in

Women's Ways of Knowing (Belenky et al., 1986) is the empirical finding that many

women showed a preference for connected knowing.

Gilligan (1982) and Noddings (1984) pointed out that women are prepared for a

life of connections to others beginning in childhood. However, according to Oakley

(1981) connection is not always favourable because women's lives are bounded by others.

Christian-Smith (1993) wrote:

> Our time is their time. Our lives are spent caring for others, listening to them, and
>
> doing their bidding. This caring provides connectedness to others and creates
>
> bonds of affection. It is what makes living in an increasingly cold and exploitative
>
> society bearable. At the same time, this caring can sap our energies and leave little
>
> space to explore the other aspects of our selves. (p. 267)

Is the purpose of connection for 'contact' or 'control'? Cook (1989) is concerned

about the subtleties of connection between 'contact' and 'control.' She described distance

education as "pre-thought study guides, standardized pacing, written-not-spoken, desire to

'contact' with 'control' implicit throughout" (pp. 36-37). Cook also explained that with

all the well-intentioned efforts to assist and support distance education students by

introducing the benefits of a wider range of institutional contacts, and by 'tightening' the

procedures, that "we may lock students into processes and points of view not necessarily the best for learning" (p. 36-37). Likewise, Tarule (1996) noted "that courses are not often a 'real group thing,' but are instead a teacher's construction of the knowledge delivered through syllabus, lectures, even facilitated discussions. The boundaries of knowledge are predefined" (p. 291). The teachers create the questions and the students respond.

<div align="center">INTERACTION</div>

Interestingly, just as the subtleties of connection between 'contact' and 'control' are being questioned, so are the underlying assumptions of interaction being examined. It is believed that "high quality interaction with learning materials, and interaction between teachers and other learners, is essential for effective learning" (Bates, 1995, p. 13). What is good quality interaction? Zhang and Fulford (1994) noticed anomalies of class interaction and actual amount of time allocated for interaction in a 10-session interactive television course. Their study revealed that the students' assessment of overall interactivity was found to be "largely based upon their observation of peer participation rather than over personal involvement" (p. 58). They concluded:

> Vicarious interaction, that is, interaction that is observed but involved no direct and overt participation of the observing student consistently contributes more to a person's assessment of overall interactivity than his or own observable participation in interaction. This provides an empirical basis for a claim that student perception of overall interactivity is shaped more by the participatory behaviours of the peers than by his or her own share of the action. (p. 62)

Although technology, such as computer conferencing, e-mail, and telephone tutoring, is designed to minimize the distance between teacher and learner and encourage interaction and participation, some studies revealed that not all women felt comfortable or satisfied with the non-visual nature of technology. Some learners found teleconferencing intimidating (Prindiville & Boak, 1987), while others found telephone tutorials impersonal and superficial (May, 1994). May spoke about some learners discomfort with technology noting that telephone contact with tutors was not "conducive to establishing personal relations" (p. 89) because it was missing nonverbal components of communications. Furthermore, another frustrating aspect of technology was the "inability to speak simultaneously" (Smith & Norlen, 1994).

THE CASE FOR SOLITUDE IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

Although the themes of connections and relations are prevalent, and a "rewriting of old tunes" (Harding, 1986, p. 646), the findings of some studies suggest that style of learning might not hold true for many adult women. Some women may choose to study in solitude. While the lack of social interaction is a criticism of distance education, Dickie (1999) cautioned, "we must not assume that isolation is a negative element, an assumption from our own presuppositions" (p. 125). "We must recognize the preferred choice of some students to be independent and to work on their own. At the same time we must work to diminish feelings of disconnections" (p. 191).

A common theme that is beginning to emerge in recent literature, and that resonates with my personal experience, is some women's preference to work independently. May (1992) disclosed that "particularly noteworthy was the solitary nature of women's study experiences and the relatively little interaction and collaborative

learning that occurred between and among students and tutors" (p. iii). When asked whether they missed interaction or "regretted having little or no contact with other students" (May, 1993, p. 41), the students replied, "probably at this point in my life, no" and "it didn't bother me not to have that interaction" (p. 41). In this same study, the majority of students "endorsed the relatively solitary nature of distance study as appropriate and useful for them" (p. 39). As one student explained, "All I want to do is get a degree and get it over with. And I don't want any shenanigans and social bunk" (p. 42). Other feminist literature (Hopkins, 1996; Jenkins, 1998; Coulter, 1989) also suggested that individual interactions with instructors or other students may not be as essential as sometimes thought.

The advantage of distance education seems to be that the physical distance provides more space for meaningful contemplation than is usually the case in the classroom (Hopkins, 1996). Many women "appreciate it as an opportunity for reflective thought and critical analysis without the threat of an authoritarian teacher and classroom situation" (McLiver & Kruger, 1993, p. 33; Weiler, 1991). Additionally, some women find it difficult to express themselves aggressively and competitively in a patriarchal classroom setting, finding it difficult to cope with the hierarchical structure and cutthroat competition of the male-centred university (Faith & Coulter, 1988; McLiver & Kruger, 1993; Maher & Dunn, 1984; Rich, 1979; Weiler, 1991). Distance education may minimize the patriarchal forms of learning within a less hierarchical environment. What's more, while it is assumed that women prefer a collaborative and connected environment to study in, Belenky et al. (1986) do agree that educators should not "impose their own

expectations and arbitrary requirements," and that "educators needed sometimes to adopt silence over imposition" (p. 229).

Learner styles and characteristics are not to be confined to one method such as learning by way of connection only. As Cranton (1992) explained:

Learning style is clearly a critical learner characteristic—the way in which individuals prefer to and best learn seems to vary markedly from person to person. If learning experiences are centred around one particular style, for example, interaction in small groups, then it is likely that at least some participants will not be learning in the most effective way for them. (p. 45)

Kolb (1984) noted that "people enter learning situations with an already-developed learning style" (p. 202). In view of this, it is likely then that learning environments will be rejected or resisted if the learning environment operates according to a learning theory that is dissimilar to an individual's preferred learning style (Kolb, 1984). Krajnc (1988) verified that learners with high self-confidence, who have the ability to acquire the knowledge themselves, are able to function more effectively in social isolation where they receive help in various forms "from a distance."

Flannery and Hayes (1995) questioned women's presumed preference for connected forms of learning that might be linked to doubts about their abilities rather than to more intrinsic learning styles. For example, women's silence in a distance education or face-to-face classroom is not necessarily associated with a lack of engagement, but could be internal interaction or perhaps protecting themselves from vulnerability (Hayes & Flannery, 1997). Women learn in other contexts—home, workplace and community and

may develop ways of knowing/learning that correspond to the different demands of each context—it may not all be "connected" (Hayes & Flannery, 1997).

Finding current examples of individuals, in particular, women learners, who are not troubled by studying in solitude, is rare. However, a recent phenomenological study entitled "*The lived experience of being a distance learner*" by Dickie (1999) offered a detailed narrative of a respondent's experience with isolation and distance education. This particular individual considers himself to be an independent worker, preferring to work on his own, with an understanding that distance learning involves a balance of connection and isolation. The following offers a brief overview of his experience with this balance.

> He feels a need to connect knowledge (gained through a partially isolated process) with applied experience, in order to complete his learning process (to make learning "real") . . . . He moves from anonymity and isolation to connection and relatedness . . . . He moves out of the isolation of his life as a distance learner into a world of connections and relationships . . . with knowledge of his newly developed expertise . . . . He shares his personal transformation experience. . . .Even the isolation led to the transformation—getting over the hurdles makes you stronger. There is isolation, then empowerment—abstract, then you apply it. It keeps going around and around . . . . For me, it needs to be an iterative process. You can't allow yourself to get stuck. There are the negative moments and the gleeful moments. (pp. 125, 126, 141)

Although the male experience described here may not be every man's experience, it is one man's experience. Some women may experience learning in solitude in a similar way. The male can experience an independent self while the female is expected to

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experience an interdependent self. Even though women share knowledge derived mainly from connected experience, undoubtedly there are women who are extremely independent, separate, and autonomous, a perspective that is missing in the literature.

There is evidence that men and women are capable of separate and connected knowing. MacKeracher (1994) implied that these approaches are gender-related and not gender-specific, but the emphasis of some feminist scholars on women as connected knowers and learners seem to suggest a gender-specific approach. MacKeracher goes on to say, "however, more men than women use the separate approach as their dominate way of thinking and learning, and more women than men use the connected approach as their dominant way of thinking and learning" (p. 79). Belenky et al. (1986) noted that connected knowing is not confined exclusively to a female voice. There are men who also "speak in this voice" (p. 102). They added that, "separate and connected knowing are not gender-specific. The two modes may be gender-related: it is possible that more women than men tip toward connected knowing, and more men than women toward separate knowing" (p. 103). However, they concluded that there is no concrete data to confirm this. They also pointed out that the women they interviewed were "not limited to a single voice. Most of them spoke sometimes in one voice, sometimes in the other" (p. 103).

Postmodern thought removes this fixed position. There is not a fixed division between solitude and connection. Thinkers, both male and female, need solitude as well as connection, but solitude and connection are not constant and involve more or less at various times of ones life course. To further elaborate on the postmodern feminist rejection of fixed identities, they renounce the dichotomy of male and female, masculine and feminine, because there are as differences between women as between men and

women. Postmodern feminism stresses these differences and not their common identity

(Blake, 1998). They "reject the possibility of a whole identity that gives rise to a single,

true voice and see liberatory potential in playing at numerous, contradictory identities"

(Mahoney, 1996, p 2). Thus, the experiences of solitude and connection could be gauged

according to a women's "personal art of living" (Vintges, 1999, p. 2). Since women's

experiences are not uniform, each will experience solitude and connection differently.

Historically, women have experienced barriers to solitude. A brief historical

examination of feminism in the twentieth century may shed some light on the activity of

solitude and connection that Pulkkinen (1993) described as the 'waves of feminism.' She

discussed the waves of feminism in the present tense, not as historical phenomena, but

"present in contemporary feminism" (p. 85) because these waves are still going on.

The first wave of feminism fights for the solitary space for women. Simone de

Beauvoir wanted to show that women could philosophize if only they were given

the same chances, if only there were not burdened by family, if only they were

given solitude. Women were not by definition social creatures who had a natural

inclination for caring and connection and who would hate to be alone.

The second wave of feminism has created a new political culture of women

based on connectedness and conscious female ethnocentrism. There is no common

goal of neutral personhood; the female world *is* different. The common

denominator of different versions of the second wave is that it stabilizes the

coding: men are connected to reason, theory, abstraction, dominance, and

violence; women to empathy, care, love, connection, aesthetics, and experience.

The code prescribes: men and philosophy, women and family.

Women do not enjoy abstract thinking, I am told. So, either I am not a woman or my experience is not a real experience. This quandary leads to the heart of postmodern issues of feminism. The third wave of feminism not only deconstructs the oneness of the political actor "woman" into class, race, nation, tribe, time and place; it also deconstructs the categories of "female" and "experience."

The second wave, like the first, has not broken. If the third wave questions the existence of "we" and connectedness as the final solution, this does not mean going back to the solitary chamber of the philosopher. Rather, it suggests the dialectics of solitude and connectedness. (pp. 85-87)

The activity of philosophy is gender-specific, and solitude is a component of philosophy. For women, philosophy is connected to loneliness, whereas the male philosopher is considered as a "solitary hero attracting love and care" (Pulkkinen, 1993, p. 88). It was not as simple for women to "occupy a position of philosophical agency" (Pulkkinen, 1993, p. 88) in a room of her own, within her family life, and without intrusion. On the other hand, the male philosopher had more access to uninterrupted solitude and viewed as being on a quest for "cosmic wisdom."

A barrier to solitude may be in a woman's own mind—in the presumed powerlessness and guilt in claiming solitude for identity, personal growth, responsibility of self, and empowerment. Although not all women are self-directed or self-motivated, distance education can play a role in helping women acquire these attributes—becoming independent, not always interdependent—by helping to remove the fear of being alone and feeling comfort and empowerment in studying in solitude. I speculate that with the

continuing pressure to interact and connect, that women learners do not have a chance to develop their selves in becoming independent learners capable of making their own decisions and choices, but continue to rely on group interaction, and at times, may only be passively participating.

As Jean Baker Miller (1986) explained in her book *Toward a New Psychology of Women*:

> To concentrate on and to take seriously one's own development is hard enough for all human beings. But, as has been recently demonstrated in many areas, it has been even harder for women. Women are not encouraged to develop as far as they possibly can and to experience the stimulation and the anguish, anxiety, and pain the process entails. Instead, they are encouraged to concentrate on forming and maintaining a relationship to one person. In fact, women are encouraged to believe that if they do go through the mental and emotional struggle of self-development, the end results will be disastrous—they will forfeit the possibility of having any close relationships. This penalty, this threat of isolation, is intolerable for anyone to contemplate. (pp. 18-19)

One article examines solitude as a connection to education as well as a positive developmental element in women's lives. Conroy-Zenke (cited in Jenkins, 1998) redefined solitude as being positive and contends that solitude is a major step towards achieving independence and self-knowledge. She mentioned the elements of choice, trust, and self-worth as keys to making solitude a positive experience. The choice of solitude as a path toward self-discovery; trusting that her experiences and voice are acknowledged;

and rediscovering her self-worth in relation to the "self" ("self-in-relation to self") rather than in relation to others.

In order to make solitude a positive experience, one needs to feel comfortable with being alone. Education needs to acknowledge the negative historical consequences about women and solitude and help women redefine the power and value of solitude in the learning process. Women need to go beyond connection and experience the power of being alone. As Alice Koller (1990) explained in *The Stations of Solitude*:

> Being solitary is being alone well: being alone luxuriously immersed in doings of your own choice, aware of the fullness of your own presence rather than the absence of others. Because solitude is an achievement. It is your distinctive way of embodying the purposes you have chosen for your life, deciding on these rather than others after deliberately observing and reflecting on your own doings and inclinings, then committing yourself to them for precisely these reasons. (p. 4)

If feminist pedagogical theory and research continues to portray the predominant female learning model as one of connection, interaction and collaboration, then future research may not explore the "dialectics of solitude and connectedness" (Pulkinnen, 1993, p. 87). To me, that emphasis in feminist pedagogy neglects to acknowledge those women who prefer to work alone, and feel comfortable being alone, needing the peace and serenity of solitude to connect with their own selves, to reflect and reenergize, to create, to clarify, and to reclaim their lives, away from the constant demands and expectations of work, families, education, and society. "Only when one is connected to one's own core is one connected to others" (Lindbergh, 1955, p. 44). "That is very important to be connected to one's own core. Connected learning means not only connection with others,

but also learning connected to your own experiences. That kind of learning for most of us requires time for reflection—solitude" (A. Young, personal communication, April 26, 2004).

By allowing women to speak for themselves, listening to what they say, acknowledging and validating women's experiences with studying in solitude, and accept learning in solitude as "another" / "alternate" way of knowing, this study deconstructed the myths surrounding women and solitude and reframed the value of solitude (transforming negative experiences into positive ones) in connection with their distance education experiences and personal lives. Women learners can take the risk to be more assertive in voicing the choices that are right for them, according to their needs and life circumstances. I am sure that they feel strongly about what they "know" but perhaps lack the tools for "expressing themselves or persuading others to listen" (Belenky et al., 1986).

<u>SUMMARY</u>

Some feminists considered that distance education confined women to their homes and, therefore, concluded that studying in isolation was inappropriate to women's learning needs. To counteract the "effects" of isolation, women were expected to participate in group work and other forms of interactive activities. Some feminist theory in the twentieth century has assumed that women learn best in a connected and collaborative environment. Those theorists assumed that connection and collaboration were the distinctive ways of knowing and learning for women.

However, there are some studies that contradict that view and show that connected learning may not appeal to all women. These studies reveal a different stream of thought enlightening us with a new view that there are some women who prefer independence

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over connection, and do not feel despair as a result. There is nothing negative about studying in solitude, but women have been socialized against it.

The next chapter explains the appropriateness of using journals as the source of data collection from which to obtain firsthand knowledge about women's experiences with studying in solitude.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHOD

<u>Research Design</u>

This research deviates from the usual positivist approach that assumes knowledge is objective and exists in and of itself. Instead, I see knowledge as socially constructed, and use interpretive social science as the framework for collecting and analyzing data. To this end, respondents are "social beings who create meaning and who constantly make sense of their worlds" (Neuman, 1997, p. 83). As a feminist doing research on the experiences of women, my role as researcher is explicit and narrative. Neuman explained this role:

> Feminist researchers are not objective or detached; they interact and collaborate with the people they study. They fuse their personal and professional lives. For example, feminist researchers will attempt to comprehend an interviewee's experiences while sharing their own feelings and experience. (p. 81)

"Writing, as a method of inquiry, is validated as a method of knowing" (Richardson, 1994, p. 418). I use personal experience to facilitate the discovery of new knowledge and understandings about women's experiences with studying in solitude. The "voice" data consisted of the participant's journals, e-mail conversations, and my own perspectives. This written work provided valuable portrayals of the participant's experiences with studying in solitude, conferencing, and group work. Journals produce rich and meaningful data from which to generate new knowledge, theories, and definitions of solitude and connection within the context of distance education. The value in telling

their story is that it may stimulate (similar) experiences and responses within the readers, or arouse curiosity, about studying solitude. The value in telling my story rests in the suggestion of C. Wright Mills (1959):

> You must learn to use your life experiences in your intellectual work: continually to examine and interpret it. In this sense craftsmanship is the centre of yourself and you are personally involved in every intellectual product upon which you may work. (p. 196)

Research Strategy

I used a less-structured research strategy in order to avoid a hierarchical relationship between the researcher and participant. An exploitative potential exists with the use of in-depth interviewing techniques, and also when endeavouring to establish trust between the researcher and participant. Oakley (1981) maintained that formal, survey-type interviewing creates a hierarchical relationship between the researcher and participant, unsuitable for good sociological work with women because it objectifies them. The participant should be free to express herself "without fear of disapproval, admonition of dispute and without advice from the interviewer" (Selltiz, Jahoda, Deutsch, & Cook, 1965, p. 68).

A less-structured research strategy would be more appropriate in establishing rapport and a basis of trust with the participants. It also tries to "ward off any tendency toward constructing a predetermined set of fixed procedures, techniques and concepts that would rule-govern the research project" (van Manen, 1997, p. 29). I endorse Oakley's (1981) prescription that the morally defensible way for me to conduct research about women's solitary experiences and distance education is to ensure that the relationship

between the researcher and participant is non-hierarchical, and when the researcher is prepared to invest her own experiences in the relationship.

Conducting the standard open-ended interview has the potential to make the participants narrow their focus to the content of the question rather than reflecting thoughtfully on the topic. Instead, the strategy used to collect the data was through the use of journals. Participants were asked to document, for a short period of time, their feelings, thoughts, and perceptions about studying in solitude, and then submit them to me for review and analysis.

Data Collection

Letter Requesting Participation.

A letter requesting participation (see Appendix A) was sent out to graduate students in the Masters of Distance Education Program at Athabasca University. In this letter, I asked interested volunteers to respond directly to me by e-mail with a sentence or two about their need/wish for solitude in learning. To help get them thinking about this, I presented them with the comment: "you might ask yourself if you find your work as a distance education student gives you a sense of isolation or an opportunity for solitude." They were advised that if they decided to participate, they would be journaling their experiences with solitude.

Ten participants consented to participate. I received eight e-mail responses from students who were interested in participating, and two responses from students who were hesitant at first, but after some dialogue were willing to participate.

Journals.

After responding to the participants e-mails and receiving their consent forms (Appendix B), I asked the ten self-selected volunteers what method of journaling they would prefer—paper or electronic. Those who preferred paper were sent a journal book. Of the ten volunteers, five wrote in a paper journal and five communicated electronically. I asked the participants to use the journals to reflect and share their experiences, apprehensions, feelings, and thoughts while studying in solitude. As examples, I suggested that journal entries could be their reactions to assignment requirements that expect collaboration with other participants; or, simply describe why they prefer to study in solitude; or, they could begin with a phrase "what would studying be like if I had a room of my own where I could study without interruptions." Each person has her own way of journaling, so the style of journal and what was written was freely chosen. They could also decide how much or how little information they wished to reveal. Journaling guidelines are included in Appendix C.

The participants were asked to journalize their experiences with solitude approximately one month into the course they were currently registered in for a period of approximately three months (February through April, 2002), once they became familiar with the course. As the course unfolded, they were asked to journal at times that were suitable for them, or as the desire or opportunity for solitude occurred, or as they experienced periods of solitude.

I designed questions as a guide for two participants who had no experience with journaling and preferred a question and answer format to help them express themselves. For those who preferred the question and answer format, the questions I designed were ones that came to mind as I was doing my literature search and were not intended for a

structured interview whereby the same set of questions are to be completed by all participants. I used these questions merely as a guide to assist the two volunteers with their journaling experience. They were advised that they could reword the questions to suit them. They were also advised that it was not necessary to answer all of them, and not to let the number of questions intimidate them. They could select those that they felt comfortable about answering, or not answer any. These questions are presented in Appendix D.

Research Volunteers

The research volunteers consisted of 10 graduate students at Athabasca University who were registered in the Master of Distance Education and the Master of Arts in Integrated Studies programs. I asked for volunteers from the *Gender Issues in Distance Education* and *Foundations of Adult Education* courses because these require a mix of independent and collaborative work with the expectations of ongoing interaction, participation, and group work, primarily through computer conferencing. I chose the *Gender Issues* course because of its feminist content, relevance of the course readings, and relevant references which I used for my literature review, and the focus of the course 'the experiences and needs of women as learners.' I chose the Foundations of *Adult Education* course because of its diverse topics—feminist pedagogy, philosophy, history, learning and teaching styles, transformative/emancipatory education, women in adult education, postmodernism, technology, group and self-directed learning, diversity and difference, and isolation, all of which provided a taxonomy for themes and issues that emerged from the participants' journals.

Permission was given by the participants, whose names and some details have been omitted to protect privacy and anonymity, to quote part or all of their journal entries. They were not coerced into writing. It was strictly voluntary and it was up to them how much or little they wrote. While the learners were not selected by random sampling, I believe they are representative of how some women experience their distance education experience with solitude and connection.

Researcher Participation

I also kept journals and notes of my own observations, thoughts, intuitions, and feelings while reading about the participant's experiences. Based on Richardson (1994, p. 526), I grouped my own writings into four categories—observation notes, methodological notes, theoretical notes, and personal notes to help me organize the data. The observation notes contained lists of "thoughts that matter" that came to mind while reading the journals. The methodological notes were messages to myself about different ways to present the participant's experiences. Theoretical notes included hunches and possible themes. Personal notes raised questions, anxieties, intuitions and philosophies while trying to make sense of the participant's experiences.

I did not collect any demographic information about the participants, so have no knowledge of their life world, other than what was revealed in their journals. Furthermore, there was journal data that prompted many questions, but there was no time for ongoing dialogue between the participants and myself. My experience with doing a thesis on solitude, based on journal data, is that I felt somewhat "disengaged" from the participants because there was no time to "connect" for ongoing dialogue, or conduct an informal interview to clarify and expand on their experiences and understandings of

solitude. I also missed the face-to-face interaction that I think would compliment and

generate more thorough and meaningful discussions about solitude and connection.

Spretnak (1991) expressed this very same "postmodern experience" when she defined

postmodernism as "a sense of detachment, displacement, and shallow engagement

dominates deconstructive-postmodern aesthetics because groundlessness is the only

constant recognized by this sensibility . . . ." (p. 13).

Journal Interpretation

Journals are beneficial because the participants can tell their stories without

intrusion and within a less hierarchical, less structured research environment. The

participants' experiences are the research data. The best way to "interpret" the data was to

quote the participants' experiences as they are the best interpreters of their own lives. The

various views about studying in solitude converged into themes about interaction, choice,

conferencing, and group work, that are discussed in the next chapter.

The analytical method used to represent their stories was based on van Manen's

(1997) "highlighting or selective approach" (p. 93). That is, certain phrases were

highlighted or selected that seemed particularly essential to the experience being

described. The interpretive framework is shaped by the experiences of the participants

and myself. The journals are highly personalized representations of the participant's

experience that "holds back on interpretation, asking the reader to 'relive' the events

emotionally with the writer" (Richardson, 1994, p. 521). Their experiences with solitude

and connection are open to a variety of meanings, interpretations and representations, not

just one solitary truth. There are as many interpretations as there are experiences, all of

which are equally valid according to one's life situations. In this case:

Data might be better conceived as the material for telling a story where the challenge becomes to generate a polyvalent database that is used to *vivify* interpretation as opposed to "support" or "prove." Turning the text into a display and interaction among perspectives and presenting material rich enough to bear re-analysis in different ways bring the reader into the analysis via dispersive impulse which fragments univocal authority. (Lather, 1991, p. 91)

Our journals are texts to "display rather than to analyze" (Lather, 1991, p. 150). I am not an expert who can translate and interpret other women's experiences, therefore, I do not impose a method of analysis on the participant's personal lives because they are experts of their own lives. Instead, I recorded direct quotations from the journals because these are "specific stories of particular events" (Richardson, 1994, p. 521). That is, these are the reflections, intuitions, and thoughts from the participants and researcher about solitude and connection that represent a "dialogic" framework for the reader. I recorded direct quotations because there was no time to establish ongoing communication between the participants and researcher so that I could "accurately" represent the participants' stories, or ask questions to clarify their experiences.

<u>Emerging Themes</u>

"Any lived-experience description is an appropriate source for uncovering thematic aspects of the phenomenon it describes" (van Manen, 1997, p. 92). The notion of themes refers to an "element which occurs frequently in the text" (van Manen, 1997, p. 78). To me this means recurring words and phrases that appeared frequently throughout the journals that prompted themes. Van Manen outlined three approaches for uncovering or isolating thematic aspects of a phenomenon (in this case, the experience of solitude and

connection): "the wholistic or sententious approach, the highlighting or selective

approach, and the line-by-line or detailed approach" (pp. 92-95). I organized the themes

according to the "highlighting or selective approach" because as I read the journals there

were certain statements and phrases that seemed "particularly essential or revealing about

the phenomenon or experience being described" (van Manen, 1997, p. 93).

What seemed to make sense to me about organizing their experiences was based

on what seemed particularly emotional and important to the participants. Their

experiences revealed insightful disclosures of key words and phrases that appeared

frequently in their journals relative to frustration with group work, conferencing, group

dynamics, lack of time, choice, academic expectations, and learning style preferences that

presented some issues to consider as themes. These experiences were organized as themes

derived from similar and recurring experiences.

Theme Credibility

Validity is generally used in describing psychological observations to provide a

scientific understanding by describing behaviour, relating two or more behaviours and

explaining the causes of behaviour. The common assertion is that "reliability," or the

stability of methods and findings, is an indictor of "validity," or the accuracy and

truthfulness of the findings (Altheide & Johnson, 1994, p. 487). In general terms,

reliability refers to the consistency of measures over time, is representative across

subgroups of people and is equivalent across multiple indicators (Neuman, 1997).

Validity refers to the truth of observations. *Internal validity* refers to whether one can

make causal statements about the relationship between variables (Cook & Campbell,

1979). *External validity* refers to the extent to which observations can be generalized to

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other settings and subject populations (Elmes et al., 1992), while o*bserver bias* or

objectivity refers to the extent to which findings are free from bias (Denzin & Lincoln,

1994, p. 100).

However, a postmodern critique argues that "the character of qualitative research

implies that there can be no criteria for judging its products" (Hammersley, 1992, p. 58)

because it "doubts all criteria and privileges none" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 480).

Richardson (1994) maintained that "postmodernism does not automatically reject

conventional methods of knowing as false or archaic. Rather, it opens those standard

methods to inquiry and introduces new methods, which are also, then, subject to critique"

(p. 517). For example, Lincoln and Guba (1985) introduced the following alternative

terms as criteria for establishing the trustworthiness of naturalistic data: "credibility"

(paralleling internal validity), "transferability" (paralleling external validity),

"dependability" (paralleling reliability), and "confirmability" (paralleling objectivity).

Another consideration that determines trustworthiness is the term "crystallization"

(Richardson, 1994). Richardson pointed out that there are more than "three sides" in

which to approach the world. She proposed that validity for the postmodern text is the

concept of "crystallization" to confirm findings. She explained:

> The central image for 'validity' for postmodernist texts is not the triangle—a rigid,
>
> fixed, two-dimensional object. . . but a crystal with an infinite variety of shapes,
>
> substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach that
>
> grow, change, and alter. . . .Crystallization, without losing structure, deconstructs
>
> the traditional idea of 'validity' (we feel how there is no single truth, we see how
>
> texts validate themselves); and crystallization provides us with a deepened,

complex, thoroughly partial, understanding of the topic. Paradoxically, we know

more and doubt what we know. (p. 522)

A postmodern context encourages writers to put themselves into their texts, what

Marcus (1986) calls "the subjective authority of women's own experience" (p. 4). So,

how do you measure the trustworthiness of "inner knowing?" To me, personal experience

and feeling are sources of knowledge, an "inner knowing," and I think that this "inner

knowing" is the "source of knowledge and truth" (Weiler, 1991), "a 'gut feeling' that

something is true, or 'right for me' " (Maher & Dunn, 1984, p. 9).

Journal Credibility

"As qualitative research is gaining acceptance in research in the education of

adults, the use of the journal in the research process is becoming more widely recognized"

(Jarvis, 2001, p. 83). It has also become an instructional and learning tool in adult

education (Hiemstra, 2001, p. 19), recognizing that journaling is an effective tool to help

develop critical and creative thinking skills (Peterson & Jones, 2001, p. 61). Journals are

a method of creating field texts created by the participants and researchers to represent

aspects of field experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). There are a variety of journal

types and formats, but perhaps the one used by the participants in this research was a

learning journal that recorded their thoughts, reflections, feelings, personal opinions, and

even hopes or fears during their educational experience of studying in solitude.

Journal writing seems to be especially suited for women's way of knowing

because it encourages women to "accept and nurture their own voices" and is a "process

of discovery" (Richardson, 1994, p. 523). Journals acknowledge the centrality of

women's own experiences: "their own tellings, livings, relivings, and retellings"

(Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 418), written naturally and freely--liberated from the educational institutions demand for conformity--their own knowledge that comes from their own experiences. History has been written primarily through a male perspective with texts focusing on the significance of men roles (Peterson & Jones, 2001, p. 60), therefore, journal writing provides an avenue for women to give accounts of their own experiences that differs from men. Sarton (1982) commented on her use of journals as a way of finding out where I really am. . . . They sort of make me feel that the fabric of my life has a meaning" (p. 25).

I believe that the criteria for determining credibility of journal writings is to listen to what the participants are saying, look at their knowledge from a variety of perspectives, value the diversity of experiences, and when we "feel their truth." The participants discover their own personal voice when journal writing, and "simultaneously comes to believe in that voice, which is the expression of her experience and instincts, as the only possible touchstone for determining what is true. But this truth cannot be generalized to others, who have their own truth" (Maher & Dunn, 1984, p. 9).

I believe that if I provide direct quotations (because that is the truth) rather than paraphrasing or summarizing their experiences, it alleviates investigator bias. Furthermore, by quoting as much information from the participants, it potentially avoids: "that's not what I said," or "that's not what I meant," or "don't quote me out of context." Furthermore, journal writings can become the basis for subsequent interview questions, because there is much more newly discovered information in journal writings rather than minimal answers from the standard interview questions.

SUMMARY

Since this research is about studying in solitude, journals are an appropriate method for data collection because they are usually written in solitude—an environment where women can reflect and focus on their own subjective knowledge. Furthermore, journal writing provided the opportunity for the participants to connect their thoughts and feelings, and to make sense of their experiences of studying in solitude at the time it was actually happening, rather than writing about something that has happened in the past.

CHAPTER FOUR

THEME DIALECTICS

The literature review and my experiences with distance education revealed that contrary to some feminist pedagogical theories, there are women who have no difficulty learning independently without ongoing interaction. I used journal writing as the best way to hear what the participants had to say about their experiences of learning in solitude and in collaboration with others. Journal writing identifies missing voices. The participants can explore and record their experiences with solitude as they experience it. Their experiences serve to illustrate the diversity of thoughts and experiences relative to solitude and interaction, rather than claim that cooperative learning is the best, or only way of learning, for example, or studying in solitude is not a good thing. Introspection can help us to develop new understandings that can help distance education practitioners better understand the importance of solitude in distance education.

My intention is to relay what the participants told me, that is, to record what was significant to them and hold back on interpretation. My objective is to show the readers of my research the participants' experiences, drawing them into their world, in effect "here is [my] world, make of it what you will" (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 103). I have presented parts of their stories under each theme. I did not want the participant's voices lost within the text, or to interpret what they said, but rather to present their statements directly to the readers. On the other hand, I acknowledge I interpreted what participants said to the extent that I designed the research, identified the themes, selected the literature that comprises part of my analysis, and selected participants' quotations that illustrate them.

These themes are:

1. Learners may not need as much interaction as "we" think they do.

2. The choice to be able to work alone and/or with a group and the choice, or not, to conference.

3. The politics of conferencing.

4. Resistance to group work and collaboration.

5. Solitude and intermittency.

The following themes have identified some of the realities the participants experienced with interaction, choice, group work, and conferencing, in a "solitary" environment. The participants have also provided accounts of the impact of computer conferencing and group work in their learning experiences. Even though these themes are described separately, they are closely interrelated.

1. <u>Learners may not need as much interaction as "we" think they do</u>. How much interaction is enough, or required, in order for learners to learn? What is the purpose of interaction—for social, academic, or procedural reasons? Perhaps the amount of interaction that a person is willing, or not willing, to engage in depends upon the nature of the subject matter, the quality of curriculum, instructor effectiveness, skills and charisma, or may depend upon the appropriateness of the course to group work and conferencing. I wonder if the preference for more or less interaction could be based on peer and instructor relations, or simply do not need it for learning. I also wonder if there are more expectations for online learning than face-to-face learning just for the sake of interaction and collaboration.

Some of the participants found that constant interaction is not entirely essential either because of lack of time, or it is not essential for learning, or because interaction already occurs in their daily lives.

I do enjoy the interaction possible at a distance, but I do not need it in order to learn.

I have always felt that I do best on my own with time to reflect rather than in the classroom setting.

If I needed to work with others, and an opportunity was included, I would take advantage of that. Forcing discussion and doing group activities take much longer and limit the potential scope of my learning.

Overall I would say that distance education can be isolating, but that the MDDE program provides lots of opportunities for those who want or need it.

Interacting and learning from others is a nice bonus, but I find that this already occurs in my daily life.

For me interaction with the course materials and the professor is sufficient given restrictions on my time. Although the opportunity to interact with other students is very helpful, it can also be very time consuming and the costs/benefits have to be considered.

Focusing on Kramarae (2001), she discovered that some women in her study placed more importance on face-to-face contact, viewing online interaction as "less satisfying, immediate, or authentic form of human contact than face-to-face contact" (p. 13). There were others who gave primacy to the importance of *not* having face-to-face contact, because they prefer to "focus on the pleasure of being able to spend more time thinking about possible answers and the best ways of phrasing them" (p. 50).

Additionally, some women valued their privacy and the chance to work alone more than interaction with students. Kramarae (2001) questioned the assumptions that women value interactive experiences in education, personal relationships with advisers and counsellors, and collaborative learning, wondering "does online learning make women feel *less* connected to students or lonelier in their education" (p. 50)? She found that:

- Many women emphasize that a distance learning student can, in one woman's terms, be "as connected as [she] want[s] to be, and after log-off, we can each focus on our families or partners for social needs."

- "I feel connected enough that when I need my mentors, I can reach them."

- Similarly, another student describes distance learning as independent rather than lonely and 'connected to information but not to other people.'

- Course structure and student preferences in large measure determine the ease and level of interaction among students.

- As adults with jobs, or careers or families, however, most student respondents do not feel as impassioned about the traditional collegiate culture. They have a firm allegiance to their roles as students but also to their roles as workers, parents, partners, or spouses. (pp. 50-51)

Age appears to be a factor as how often (or how little) interaction learners need. Kramarae (2001) found that older students are likely to minimize the importance of social experiences or interaction in the classroom because those needs are met elsewhere, while they are more important to younger students.

Lack of face-to-face interaction is a drawback to the online environment because students miss facial expressions, instant interaction, and the immediacy of dialogue and

feedback from groups and instructors. In the Sullivan (2001) study, the lack of face-to-face interaction was the single most common negative criticism primarily from female learners.

2. <u>The choice to be able to work alone or with a group and the choice, or not, to conference</u>. Distance Education, by removing barriers of time and place, can allow learners greater flexibility. It provides options for learners to work alone or in groups, to correspond with the instructor and other learners. This flexibility encourages independent work, individualized learning, individual development and choice, reflection, and experiential learning. Distance education provides a platform to construct new understandings, engage in group work, conference participation and interaction. Online learning can provide for asynchronous communication that give learners time to think about their responses and respond when it is convenient. In this they have more control over their learning. But, at the same time, there appears to be some inflexibility in allowing individuals to make choices that suits their needs, particularly with respect to conferencing and group work. It is possible that the demands of a graduate course prohibit choice. Furthermore, the academic institution may need to take into consideration that by the time women reach graduate school that they are already fully submerged in a career and family leaving little time for anything else, and arrive with a preferred or already developed preferred learning style. In addition to personal preference, other possibilities why learners choose to work alone could be the result of discomfort with technology, unpleasant conferencing and group work experiences, conflicts with an individual's learning style and personal characteristic, or the time involved.

An element that occurred frequently throughout the journals was "choice."

There is an instinctive part of me that prefers to work alone.

I choose to work independently as I do not have time to waste on frivolous discussion and attendance at classes where I am told the same things found in a text.

I prefer to work on my own and at my own pace and convenience. I had 90% on the first and 82% on the second paper. An A on the final paper. That would mean I have a potential A. If, however, the participation mark is one based on activity, an A student will end up with a 70% on the course. Somehow that seems wrong to me. Why should a person who is clearly capable of understanding the concepts and of expressing and applying the concepts at a high level in writing be restricted to a low B standing because of not participating in conferences? This is the place where personal learning styles and needs come in. If I choose to work in isolation and I am successful, what is the harm of that? If I choose to work in isolation and I am unsuccessful, that is my choice. I am an adult learner. Social interaction helps us build ideas with a doubt. It helps shape the product of our thoughts. Should it be evaluated beyond that????

I like being able to work alone, most of the time, and interact with others through conferencing, if I choose. I like not having to put up with annoying others.

At this point in my life, I tend to be set in my ways and appreciate not having to compromise as a group member. I can be a team player when I have to, but prefer to work alone.

I love to work and study alone. I don't usually offer to do joint assignments when we have the option. This is why I love e-mail so much. It is asynchronous and I can do it when I want—on my own terms.

I think one joint assignment is good—not more in a semester long course. I also think that we should be required to reply to some postings, and that's part of the mark. That still allows about 60% of the class to be done independently if a person chooses. That feels really important.

Haughey (1998) remarked:

Online learning is useful because of its flexibility. It allows instructors to adapt

and design materials and assignments to meet individual learner's needs and

lifestyles. It provides options for learners to work alone, to correspond directly

with the instructor and to work with peers in group conferences. This gives

instructors the opportunity to encourage independent work as well as group

participation. (p. 86)

Yet, at the same time Haughey (1998) is concerned that too much autonomy could lead to

less participation and more lurking. The lurking phenomena seemed to bring on a

negative connotation than is warranted since "learners should be given some control over

deciding when they wish to participate" (p. 87). But according to Candy (1991), "it is

important to note that autonomy does not imply antisocial solitude or indifference to the

attitudes, opinions, preferences, or well-being of others. To the contrary, autonomy

involves cooperation, flexibility, and mutual respect" (p. 123). He continued: "Those who

support individuality in learning must be confident that they are not, at the same time,

weakening the ability especially of the powerless or disadvantage to work together for

their collective advancement" (p. 123).

3. <u>The politics of conferencing</u>. Parallel with 'choice,' the conferencing

environment does not always appear to be a warm, welcoming environment. Although

CMC is highly sophisticated and creative, it seems to generate frustration for some women as the participants in this study revealed.

> *I'm finding (the instructors) format a bit restrictive. With the last course, the discussion groups were optional and with not marks assigned—the discussion was a bit freer—on a more personal level—helped to relate the materials to our own situation. In this course (the instructor) has us answer specific questions—which is good for getting the discussion started—but with marks attached—the postings are long and I think the flow of ideas is stilted.*

> *If for whatever reason I have trouble making it through the readings, I don't feel knowledgeable enough to engage in the CMC.*

> *As much as I like studying for marks, one conforms to the requirements no matter what they are.*

> *There is the need for the opportunity for conferencing—to clarify issues, to ask questions—but I can't seem to get beyond this feeling of pressure to do something just for the sake of being added.*

> *My readings are great, but I just can't get to the same level of enthusiasm with the conferencing component.*

> *I don't feel my thoughts are clear or concise enough to post as such.*

> *Overall it was one of the most time consuming courses I have taken at AU because of the extensive use of conferences.*

> *I am finding it a chore to get to the conferences at all. There is so much useless repetition that I don't want to waste my time on that stuff. There are 9 conferences!*

Why should we be expected to do a conference in one week, the week before a paper is due?? Doesn't make pedagogical sense to me. Perhaps it is that "discussion" piece that we all hear so much about in DE. I find myself feeling guilty at not going into the conference when I am trying to get through readings and write a paper. Guilt has no place in my academic life! I am finding the discussions full of rhetoric and repetition anyhow.

I have come to the conclusion that I will kiss the 20% participation goodbye if it means I have to wade through conference after conference in one-week timeframes. I don't have the time and, quite honestly, I find it silly to be given a set of questions at the masters level. I guess this is that isolation thing again. I enjoy being able to talk (write) with others about the ideas of the course. I do not mind some direction to get that started. I do mind the feeling that we have to answer four questions. It makes for repetition and people who appear in the conferences simply because it is required. It also contrives the discussion in ways that you would not in a f2f situation. Do you grade students on classroom discussion in f2f masters courses? I think not.

The group in the course seemed to be quite active in the conferences and seemed to enjoy the discussion aspect. As a person who likes to get things done and to do the learning as efficiently as possible, I found the process too laborious. One of the reasons for studying via DE is that it allows you autonomy as to when you are going to work.

Basically, I don't view myself as a very outgoing or social person, much to my own dismay. I tend to be a lurker in conferences and listservs unless I truly believe that I have something important to contribute. I believe that some people just like to "hear" themselves and add no value to the discussion. Although I believe I am a good writer, I

don't like to write. I have trouble elaborating. I try to be succinct and seek out "le mot

juste" as the French say, the exact term to fit the situation. Anyway, I do what I have to

do given the job at hand. I set very high standards for myself, not because I must make all

A's, but because I'm capable, and I don't like to give half-hearted efforts.

The conferences required in most of my MDE courses, I usually really like to

follow. When I do make a comment, I'm very anxious to get a response and am very

disappointed if no one responds to my postings (which happens more than I'd like). It's

like being invisible; everyone is ignoring you.

The conference thing can be a roadblock. I decided to ignore them this time since

the real learning should come from the readings and assignments.

The subject matter is great but this component of conferencing is driving me wild.

A full 20% of our grade will be based on contributions to the conferencing? And I thought

the idea of D.E. was to give the student flexibility! Boy was I wrong. I feel that I have to

be there to conference before anyone else has the opportunity to "steal" my ideas. I hate

redundancy and feel no drive to reword someone else's thoughts. But I feel pressure to do

so, for the grade component!

I had almost been concerned that e-mail would do just as well, but it doesn't. It

appears to me to only blur the boundaries of solitude study and classroom. I feel that I

am in solitude here—missing the immediacy of 3D classmates. I don't need to post my

ideas. I need immediate feedback   good or bad   about them. I need to <u>see</u> responses,

<u>hear</u> hesitation, be challenged right away. Conferencing doesn't do that at all—it just

confuses my sense of time, and my ideas are left confused because of the delay.

I have found a partner and a topic for the 2ⁿᵈ assignment (. . .). But I still have a big problem with the conferencing. I just don't like talking to a screen, I guess. (. . .) giving up my profession of 25 years was a tough one. It feels so good to be immersed in something new, challenged mentally and feeling excited instead of exhausted. So, I have to accept the "requirements" of conferencing as an invasion of my solitude, just to reap the benefits of the MDDE program.

I'm feeling rather overwhelmed by what is going on in the conferences. So much theorizing. Do these thoughts just come to the posters, or do they plan what is being posted? I feel like I'm expected to write a full paper for every posting. It's not at all spontaneous like f 2 f. I guess I like things short, sweet, fast and humorous. Conferencing doesn't always fit that bill.

Need to concentrate on conferencing more. Can't quite figure out why I'm having so much trouble with this, but I just can't stay focused on the screen. Much better with paper copy.

I was surprised in a previous course, how easy it is to communicate with each other with Firetalk. At least with a voice on the other end it would be easier for some.

Conference very interesting. Hard to keep up with the flow of information, especially if you miss a day.

Have not had the mental energy to participate in the last conference—have just been "lurking" rather than trying to make a contribution.

Burge (1994) noted that some learners described themselves as being "out of sync" with class discussions. Those that felt out of sync gave reasons such as failure to log on regularly, unexpected interruptions of family or school events; lack of emotional energy;

an uncongenial atmosphere; and discomfort. Other reasons given were "the perceived

irrelevance of the topic, technological difficulties, unrealistic attempts to keep up with

everything, dysfunctionally divergent peers, poor message threading, and a focus on one's

project at the exclusion of anything else" (p. 31). They also cited "pressure to log on

frequently to keep up with class discussions, information overload, and self-imposed

exclusion from discussion as disadvantages of asynchronicity" (p. 31).

Katz, Hutton, and Wiesenberg (1997) observed that "after weeks of words on a

screen, the virtual learner begins to hunger for the sound of a voice and 'real connection'

with other learners and professors. Learners are challenged in trying to meet these needs

in ways other than through computer conference" (p. 62). I speculate that the lack of 'real

connection' may serve to reduce motivation or increase frustration in conferencing.

Given the flexible nature of distance education, in most cases computer

conferencing seems to be very much structured, controlled, and excessive. It also appears

that the main criteria for getting students to participate in conferencing is by assigning

grades or credits, otherwise it may be that very little conferencing would take place.

Herring (1996b) asserted that "rather being democratic, CMC is power-based and

hierarchical. This state of affairs cannot, however, be attributed to the influence of

computer communication technology; rather, it continues preexisting patterns of hierarchy

and male dominance in academia more generally, and in society as a whole" (p. 486).

Along the same means, Perry and Greber (1990) also questioned to what extent

"technologies reflect or reinforce the patriarchal order" (p. 76). Likewise, Campbell

(2000) made reference to the "androcentric design reproducing and reinforcing sexist

gender ideologies" (p. 132). Could these views be underlying currents towards women's unnamed anxiety with technology?

4. <u>Resistance to group work and collaboration</u>. "No group work, please! Echoing women who express a preference for independent study, many women state that they loathe group work" (Kramarae, 2001, p. 18). Although women enjoy group discussion, they are not particularly happy with doing group work. "Many women prefer independent study because they can count on themselves more than anyone else, an important factor for people with tight schedules" (p. 18).

I find that I need time to critically reflect and to process information, and although I do appreciate the value of group work, I prefer to work alone at my own pace. From a 'feminist perspective' I have often wondered if this is a natural preference or if it has been ingrained through traditional academic education.

We are all thrown in together to come up with a collaborative plan.

I found that the group collaboration was a bit contrived.

Everyone is so busy that it will be hard to pull this altogether. It is hard to collaborate this way. Too many people and too many e-mails flying back and forth. Hard to connect with the others. Some of the group is making connections better than others. Even though this is supposed to be a group collaboration, I am finding it a bit isolating and contrived. I am not sure why—group collaboration has worked better on other courses.

Where I like groups—or talking with someone else is when I need to consult when I am struck—when I need more than one opinion.

As much as I like studying in solitude, I always end up enjoying group work. I think, when one is studying for marks, one conforms to the requirements—no matter that they are.

I think there can be too many persons in a group. I find that three is the ideal number for the type of project we do. If you have too few, the workload is too great and there are too many groups prolonging the presentations and reducing the effectiveness of the project. Too many participants result in chaos and ineffectiveness.

I occasionally like a group project, but usually only when I don't know how to approach something. I think I would rather discuss the possibilities and then go off on my own.

I am resistant because of the amount of time group work will take in this class. I would love to get into all the readings, as there are such interesting materials. I fear how much work group time will take.

As a person who likes to get things done and to do the learning as efficiently as possible, I found the process too laborious. One of the reasons for studying via DE is that it allows you autonomy as to when you are going to work.

I just don't know if I have the time to do the work.

If it had been a solo effort it would have taken 1 or maybe 2 days tops, instead of 5 [five].

I know you can't do good work if you don't have a good team.

Have been emailing & faxing (. . .) back & forth. This is the hard part of distance ed—when you have to work with a partner. The time frame between e-mails makes

discussion minimal and I'm wondering about what exactly are the benefits of working in

pairs.

Maybe it's just me—I prefer to work alone.

Kramarae (2001) challenged the assumption that women prefer to work in collaborative group settings. In a study based on interviews and questionnaires from more than 500 women and men in a variety of occupations, the majority of women in her study indicated that they prefer independent study. She pointed out that "older women may prefer different learning methods than do younger women" (p. 18). Furthermore, "technology and new communication methods may have changed students' expectations and preferences for education or make collaborative work more difficult" (p. 18).

The women in Kramarae's (2001) study gave the following reasons for disliking group work:

- Difficulty in allocating and sharing work fairly.

- The inability to agree on themes, tasks, methods, and logistical problems.

- Pressure to go along with decisions made by the most powerful of the group.

- Dislike of the indecisiveness and politics that can be involved in group work.

- The relatively slow speed of group work.

- Difficulty in managing their own schedules and coordinating schedules with other learners.

Similarly, Mason and Weller (2001) experienced complaints about group work demands on courses offered through the Open University in Great Britain. Student reactions to group work were as follows:

"Somebody expects us to work together like a well-oiled machine."

"Expectations were too high."

"There was a sharing of ideas, but little agreement or compromise."

"Found group work more of a hindrance to progress than help."

"Catching up on conferences is a big investment of time for small benefit."

"Necessity for group work so early in the course created unnecessary pressure."

If we are given more freedom of choice with respect to group work, or working independently, perhaps we can increase our capacity for better quality collaborative learning and conferencing, thereby decreasing the amount of discomfort experienced with online learning.

Pilling-Cormick (1997) expressed concern about group work advising that "it is important for educators to discover how learners feel about group processes and especially sharing feelings " (p.75). She pointed out, "even though group work is an integral part of self-directed learning, working effectively in a group compromises another set of skills that we often assume students have when they do not" (p. 75). She also said that instructors form the groups to work on projects even though some adults "often display apprehension about sharing their feelings in a group situation. This may be a product of unpleasant experiences with groups in the past, or it may be that learners simply have not had practice with or guidance in group work" (p. 75).

5. Solitude and intermittency—a balance. Some learners in this research expressed the acceptance, as well as the need, for a balance of solitude to think, reflect, read and write, as well as sharing their experiences and ideas with others. Although common themes may emerge, each person will react individually to the experiences of solitude and interaction.

Having peace and quiet to think and learn. Finding an answer to a problem. Thinking anything you want and supporting it with research. No constraints on when you must do something.

By studying in solitude, one relies only upon him/herself. Self-instruction is empowering. I can do it by myself. I don't need anyone else to help me master this skill/concept.

I found that I identified with the 'multi-role women' mentioned by May (1993) who prefer relatively solitary study in the achievement of their educational goals.

I prefer to work by myself as I can then focus directly on the material I am working with and complete the task at hand more efficiently and effectively. Thus, I espouse solitude as a manner of working.

If I could choose to work alone or with my (. . .) group, ALONE!! If I could choose to work alone or with my (. . .) partner, probably with my partner. I must have solitude to read, concentrate, or write.

The subject matter of solitude is interesting to me in that I have always felt that I do my best on my own with time to reflect rather than in the classroom setting.

I don't think studying in solitude is a barrier. One can be "in solitude" in a room full of people.

I don't think I prefer to study in solitude. I want to discuss and chat with my classmate.

In solitude, I can rely on myself. I'm not in competition with anyone.

I actually am looking forward to being able to say—and enforce—I need time alone for study! (. . .) is well suited for "solitude" study and warrants itself well to long

schedules of time totally dedicated to study. And I like that approach. Most of my days

are spent balancing hundreds of things, people and duties, setting priorities, and on a

continuous basis, so the idea of doing something totally on my own is <u>so</u> welcome!

I enjoy my solitude because I can work better without anybody around me.

We talk about solitude, but maybe should look at loneliness. Many of us may be

suffering of loneliness even though we are surrounded by people.

Solitude is so important to me—I even love the sound of the word—however, I

think I need a mix. I need some connection—and it's ok if it is required.

I do find the need for solitude in learning—to a degree.

I study well in solitude—my situation, at present, allows me much time alone

(during the day anyway) and I like that. For reading, assimilating and digesting subject

matter. But I also need some opportunity for social feedback. There is nothing like the

crossfire of ideas, and the immediacy of laughter in a classroom setting. Once a week or

so would be more than enough to satisfy that personal need.

I prefer solitude for major pieces of work that I undertake for marks in any

program of study, i.e. papers, projects. I like group work as an ancillary to this, i.e., the

requirement to post answers to questions on conference boards. I like group work in a

workshop setting, short seminars, joint presentations or work-based ventures.

I think a reasonable component of both solitary and group-based learning is a

good idea in any course. Independent learning has the potential to occur, or not, in both.

I am someone who can travel to either end of the continuum on your topic. I am in

a self-directed Distance Education program. I want to design my own program and work

on my own and dialogue with the literature on my own. And, I am lonely for

companionship----more to talk about how the process of learning is going so as to motivate me to go back into my cell to read and write on my own. Supporting relationships are really important to me . . . Hmmm—perhaps that isn't the other end of the continuum.

I am not sure how I feel about solitude in learning. There is, for sure, an instinctive part of me that prefers to work alone. But there is also another part of me, that almost always intercedes almost immediately to say "but don't you believe that relationships are important?" And how can one engage in relationship alone? That is, in my worldview so-to-speak, I think other people are very important. I don't know anymore, whether it is healthy (for myself) to think in the vacuum of my own thoughts. I think that I can learn lots about my own beliefs by connecting and touching other people. I guess, in a nutshell, I have an ongoing duel with myself about what I should prefer. Instinctively, as noted, I prefer solitude. But my experience of connecting is that it can be empowering, for me, also.

I enjoy working on my own and through networking with others in projects.

So here is my mix. I love to work and study alone. I don't usually offer to do joint assignments when we have the option. This is why I love e-mail so much. It is asynchronous and I can do it when I want—on my terms. Where I like groups – or talking with someone else is when I need to consult—when I am stuck—when I need more than one opinion.

Lindberg (1955/1997) referred to the ebb and flow of one's existence as intermittency: "The solution for me, surely, is neither in total renunciation of the world, nor in total acceptance of it. I must find a balance somewhere, or an alternating rhythm

between these two extremes; a swinging of the pendulum between solitude and communion, between retreat and return" (p.30).

Similarly, Nietzsche (cited in Hillesheim, 1969) talked about the pattern of periodical withdrawal (isolating oneself from others) in order to deepen your wisdom and then return again to the crowds (re-establishing human contacts) to share with humankind. He concluded that in the modern world, "including educational institutions, that an appreciation of solitude is sorely lacking" (p. 359) and recommended that the schools provide a "climate congenial to solitude and reflection" (p. 359). Solitude provides the opportunity for people to come to terms with who they are and thus become more effective people of action.

Many participants in Kramarae's (2001, p. 18) study disclosed that they rely on a variety of experiences for learning. For instance:

- Many women indicated that they learn equally, in integrated ways, from all three methods (group, independent, and a mix of both settings). As an example, a 30 year-old teacher stated that she learns best from a combination: "We share ideas and expand our thinking through discussions. I go into deeper thinking and organize my comprehensions through independent work. In group work, we check our understanding and help fill each others' gaps."

- "I would choose a little of each, but if I had to rank them, I would put independent work first, followed by discussion, then group work. In group work, I tend not be as self-assured as I should be. If someone in the group is pushy (even if they are not so competent), I will let them take over. I just do not enjoy the friction."

- "I read, I listen, I ask, I feel, I experience. I need both group work and time to let ideas settle, sift."

- "I learn through discussion, independent [work], and group work."

Her study also revealed that while more than half indicated independent learning as their first choice, "many of them say they learn best by first reading, researching, and writing and then participating in group discussions to hear other opinions and ideas" (p. 18).

The comments from the participants in this study appear to tell us that they just "know" how and what works best for them. There is nothing to suggest that they preferred to learn primarily through connection and collaboration. They seem not to have difficulty learning independently in the solitary distance education environment as opposed by the feminist connection concept.

<u>TIME</u>

Have been meaning to sit down and write—hard to take a break and make time for myself.

Doesn't take long for the course to become overwhelming. You start with the best intentions and arrange your life to make time for learning but then life takes over.

Time is a major concern for the participants of this study that is mentioned quite often throughout their journal writings and should be mentioned here. Their experiences with time are mainly included in the conferencing and group work themes. In addition to the volume of time needed for reading, research and writing papers, it takes time to organize and collaborate group work as well as to compose your thoughts and answers to individual postings and conferences. But what about the learner who is taking more than

one course per semester? The amount of conferencing and group projects doubles, or triples, in some cases, their workload.

Several articles talk about women's multi-task lives and time involved to coordinate the demands of family, household chores, and job, while also trying to pursue an education. Kramarae (2001) discussed these time demands in terms of three shifts. She explained that many women "serve a first shift at work outside the home and second shift as primary caretakers of family members" (p. 29). The third shift is their education that tends to be fit in when and where they can (Kramarae, 2001). "Many learners express surprise at the sheer volume of time required to read and respond to individual postings on a weekly basis" (Katz, Hutton, & Wiesenberg, 1997, p. 63). In Burge's (1994) research, time was identified as a weakness of computer conferencing in terms of affecting information processing and management. Learners experienced delays "in getting responses to messages, the need to process information quickly, and the desire of some interviewees for real-time interaction with peers and with their instructor" (p. 33). This creates a longer communication cycle requiring more time.

Collaborative learning takes a considerable amount of time and energy. Group work involves organizing the group, determining a "leader," a topic, trying to cope with asynchronous conversations, time zones, and so forth. Conferencing involves designing and answering many questions that requires reading the comment, reflecting on it, and perhaps more often than not researching an answer—which all takes time. There seems to be little time left to focus on the topic of the course, for researching and writing the actual assignments. As one participant in this study stated: "I fear that the technical part of it has overshadowed the Adult Ed aspect and we will pay the price on that."

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SUMMARY

This chapter presented the realities of ten participants studying in solitude. I

discussed five themes that emerged from their journals. The feedback from the

participants' journals indicated to me that the main issues were:

1. Learners may not need the amount of interaction than is thought necessary.

2. The choice to be able to work independently and/or with a group, and the choice,

    or not, to conference.

3. The politics of conferencing.

4. Resistance to group work and collaboration.

5. Solitude and intermittency.

Each theme presented the participants' discussions about their experiences with

interaction, choice, conferencing, group work, collaboration and solitude, while studying

in solitude. Theme One suggested that interaction is not something that one needs all the

time. Theme Two discussed their preferences for flexibility in making choices relative to

group work and conferencing. Theme Three offered a variety of concerns with

conferencing such as the amount of conferencing required, redundancy, the pressure to

comply, and time. Theme Four discussed obstructions with group work. Theme Five is a

step towards learning more about solitude, by hearing the participants' responses about

learning in solitude. Time was also addressed because it is a very real concern for the

participants who are trying to juggle family, career, and education which Kramarae (2001)

referred to as three shifts.

The last chapter explores the notion of solitude as "another" / "alternate" way of

knowing.

CHAPTER FIVE

SOLITUDE: A WAY OF KNOWING

Research on using technology CMC to enhance communications in distance education seems predominant over critiques of CMC practices and goals. There is more research about how technology can enhance an on-line community of learners that stresses a collaborative and highly interactive learning environment in order to construct knowledge communally. There is less research about individual concerns and issues with distance education, interaction and technology that examines the topic of this investigation, the solitary experiences of some female learners in distance education.

In Chapter One, I wrote about my experiences as a female distance education student learning in solitude, that raised two concerns for me: (a) the idea that it was best for women to learn primarily in a connected, relational environment in contrast to those who preferred a more independent learning environment, and (b) the practices of ongoing interaction, computer conferencing and group projects. In Chapter Two, the literature review began with how some authors view isolation as an unsuitable environment for women to learn in. They inform us of the consequences of studying in isolation, thus recommend that women learn in a connected environment. Other feminist scholars accept the fact that studying in solitude can be positive. Chapter Three elaborates on using journal writing as a viable research method of collecting data about female distance learners' experiences with studying in solitude. Chapter Four discusses the themes derived from the participants' experiences. Chapter Five wraps up this thesis with some insights from the data about the difference between isolation and solitude. The data show that the

women who participated in this research have a need for the right balance between independence and interaction and collaboration among female distance learners. Further, the participants stressed the importance to them of being able to choose the levels of solitude and the timing and quantity of interaction with others.

<u>THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: MODELS OF LEARNING AND KNOWING</u>

Technology has created a learning environment that has become too technical and structured, thereby missing the holistic aspect of learning. Authors such as Joseph (1996), Cole (1980), Charness (1995), and Rose (1994), alert us to the cultural, socio-economic, life experience, and physiological diversity of an adult population, necessitating a variety of learning methods, styles, formats, and environments to facilitate effective learning.

Hayes and Flannery (1997) claimed that there is no evidence that connected knowing is a gender-specific learning style preference or a consistent preference for adult women, nor is there substantial empirical support in other published literature. Women did not express any one way of knowing or acquiring knowledge. In fact, "women learn in diverse ways that may change according to context and their own past experiences" (Hayes & Flannery, 1997, p. 76).

The participants in this project discussed their learning style preferences regarding solitude, interaction, group work and collaboration, but this study has not explored the effects of using those learning styles. It seems likely that the participants tried to learn as efficiently as possible given time, course workload, family, and career constraints, and so selected a method of learning that fitted with personal life issues, or perhaps the nature of the course.

Belenky et al. (1986) indicated that women prefer a single way of knowing, that is, that women learn primarily in a connective environment. Is connected learning a natural inclination or a procedure? Is separate learning a natural inclination or a procedure? According to Clinchy (1996), connected and separate knowing are procedures, but we must have a natural inclination to one or the other or both. Some of the participants, and myself, seem to have a natural inclination for solitude, which, at times, is suppressed by the expected conformity to connection and collaboration. If my natural inclination for solitude and independence is suppressed, then it means that my natural voice, natural language, and natural way of writing are being suppressed.

Learning environments are complex with learning experiences unique to each person. I have come across a variety of models on learning that seem to apply to both men and women. For example, creative storytelling (Estés, 1992); "the many facets of transformative learning theory and practice" (Grabove, 1997, p.98); a holistic concept of transformative learning—"learning through soul" (Dirkx, 1997); wholistic learning (Burge, 1993; MacKeracher, 1996); experiential learning (Kolb, 1984); and critical reflection and transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997). I suggest that learning in solitude invites experiences of solitude into each of these models as a way of knowing for autonomous individuals.

Transformative learning is based on the analysis and questioning of underlying assumptions (or meaning perspectives) acquired from an individual's past experience (Cranton, 1992). The transformative learning process involves "transforming frames of reference through critical reflection of assumptions, validating contested beliefs through discourse and taking action on one's reflective insight . . . ."(Mezirow, 1997, p.11).

Transformative learning also "develops autonomous thinking" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5) and is intuitive, creative, and emotional (Scott, 1997).

Transformative learning not only happens in the classroom, but also takes place privately in solitude. Once we have reflected, written, and edited our thoughts in solitude, we bring these transformations to the community, to be shared with others, when and if we want to. Transformative learning can begin with solitude, in a private sphere. In distance education, where does reflection and learning begin? For some learners, it will begin in solitude, in preparation of questions and answers for asynchronous conversations, critically reflecting on answers for computer conferences, project ideas for group work, or other assignments. Then we get together as a community to share our thoughts. There is an interconnectedness, a dynamic relationship between solitude and interaction that share some common elements-- "humanism, emancipation, autonomy, critical reflection, equity, self-knowledge, participation, communication, and discourse" (Grabove, 1997, p. 90).

Palmer (1989) talked about the balance between solitude and community, in particular a community that shares similar values to your own. He said that,

> "We all need community—and since community is hard to come by in this society, we need to find ways of gathering it unto ourselves. In every situation where a person feels isolated because of their values, there will be two, three, or four, other people who also feel that way. Part of our task is to search out folks who are on this journey with us and gather them in various ways, creating communities that can help us follow our own lights and to do the best work we can" (p. 29).

In the case of studying in solitude, it is necessary to critically reflect on and reconsider the negative ideas about the assumptions that studying in solitude is negative, and that women prefer an interactive environment, to a more positive outlook of studying in solitude. Further research could explore the pedagogical significances of studying in solitude and collect more data on individual learners' experiences about studying in solitude. Furthermore, future research could focus on the relationship between studying in solitude and the personal and learning transformation that occurs as a result.

ASSUMPTION OF "ISOLATION"

Solitude versus isolation. . .I think that isolation is a state of being while solitude is a state of mind.

1. The assumption that women studying at home are considered to be isolated and confined to their homes has been replaced by the more positive concept of independence and solitude, and personal preference.

2. The participants in this research did not express that they felt "isolated" or needed to be connected to others in order to learn. One thing that really stood out in the results of this study was individual learning preferences for solitude, interaction, or various combinations of them.

3. Some feminist pedagogical theorists considered studying in isolation as a barrier for women (Kirkup & von Prummer, 1990; Coulter, 1989; Faith & Coulter, 1988). I speculate that perhaps the isolation lies in the lack of face-to-face interaction, and that the computer monitor acts as a boundary that limits the "feeling" of interaction between learners and instructors, and other learners.

INTERACTION

Interacting online is limited because it lacks the richness of face-to-face communication. The conversations may not be synchronous, but may be a two-way exchange of words read from a monitor in an asynchronous environment. My sense about studying in solitude is that in spite of the variety of ways used to get people to interact it is face-to-face contact that gives that "feel" of being connected.

Juler (1990) offered an interesting article on discourse (which he referred to as a metaphor in distance education) and interaction. He wrote: "discourse has the advantage that it has a range of uses from the completely non-interactive monologue to the highly interactive group discussion . . . ." (p. 25). He focused on the flexibility of text as the medium for independent study and interaction, rather than the customary procedures of direct contact between learners and instructors. Distance education is highly dependent upon text, using study guides, textbooks, readings, and computer conferences as its basic teaching materials. Learners interact extensively with the text and their own written work (Daniel & Marquis, 1979). Daniel and Marquis looked at independence to denote learning activities in which there is no interaction involved, such as, "study of written material; writing essays and assignments; working alone at a computer terminal; laboratory experiments at home; and surveys and project work" (p. 30). They do this in solitude.

ALTERNATIVES TO THE ASSUMPTIONS OF STRUCTURED GROUP WORK AND CONFERENCING

Distance education is highly structured. I think that group work and collaboration are oppressive if exercised through coercion. Juler (1990) proposed that distance education should be a little more "unstructured and unpredictable . . . a free flowing, almost rambling, complex of conversations taking place in a critical community which is

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never fixed but which expands and contracts as necessary" (p. 32). I think this would work well for the women who participated in this research (and perhaps other women learners) because their lives are not structured or predictable. With independent interaction, the female learner would have more control in scheduling her time and perhaps be more motivated to interact, rather than being coerced into interaction. Juler (1990) advised that distance educators adopt a discourse model that encourages a "wider range of interactions in which students function with the maximum possible independence" (p. 27).

Distance education dominates how, when, and the amount of interaction that is required, but could be more flexible and thus permit more independence for women learners to determine how, when, and the amount of interaction that would suit their needs.

In an autonomous and independent learning environment, learners are enabled to make choices and have more control. Facilitators need to reflect on learners' needs, avoiding the assumptions that solitude is negative, in order to adopt flexible and holistic teaching strategies for women learners. Distance learners should feel free to choose to forfeit interaction with other learners and instructors, but still be free to participate.

Savard (1995) wrote that the "attraction of distance education is that students are free to learn where and when they choose. Using cooperative learning may not support the extent to which these benefits are realized" (p. 127). Also, Rogers, in a dialogue with Skinner, stated, "one of the essential bases for maximizing the human potential is to make continually available the opportunity and the necessity of choice" (Kirschenbaum & Henderson, 1989, p. 151).

Although the educator is "responsible for fostering critical reflection" (Grabove, 1997, p. 90), it must be remembered that the learner is an "equal partner in the learning process and must feel free from coercion" (Grabove, 1997, p. 90). Solitude can be or is an intentional practice, not a coerced activity. "Solitude is not an absence of energy or action, as some believe, but is rather a boon of world provisions transmitted to us from the soul" (Estes, 1992, p. 293).

Distance education provides a variety of support such as computer conferencing, e-mail, tutors, and telephone, but we need to go beyond these supports and begin to address the life experiences of women learners. Distance educators also need to appreciate and support those women who express the need to make their own choices and determine their own agenda. Burge (1993) mentioned that we need to examine the word "support." "Do learners need crutches? Are they 'in deficit'? Or do they need confirmation that what they are experiencing is legitimate, and not destructive of self-esteem" (p. 8).

I have found through the journals of some women learners, how those women experience solitude and interaction in distance education. Further, the women discussed distance education in the context of their daily lives; provide the necessary "support" to help improve their distance education experiences (if needing improvement); and ensuring quality solitude and interaction, along with quality participation in computer conferencing and group work.

<u>IN CLOSING</u>

I have examined the presumption that women learn best in an interactive, not solitary, environment. The factors which seemed relative to these perspectives were time, choice, course load, individual preferences, and discomfort with technology. From the

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participants' perspectives, the main themes derived from their experiences suggest that women learners:

1. May not need as much interaction as has been considered necessary.

2. Want to choose to work alone, or in a group, and whether to take part in computer conferences.

These themes suggest guiding issues for future research about learning in solitude, and the balance of solitude and connection.

I was experiencing a growing disbelief that women necessarily learn in interaction with others. I do understand that in the past it was important for women to come out of their silent and isolated way of life to share their experiences in order to better their lives. Hence, the feminist concept of connection that has continued to this day. However, women's lives have changed and are much more diverse, more women have careers, or volunteer, or travel. They are away from their homes more now than in the past. They are not returning to "isolation" if they choose more solitude for themselves. Today, solitude is healing and therapeutic; and, I think, necessary for women because I believe their lives are stressful and demanding.

Through this research, I found evidence that questions women learners' needs for interaction in distance learning. That question is supported by some of the literature I reviewed, by my personal experiences as a distance learner, and by the research participants' experiences revealed to me in their journals. Individual learners are in the best position to assess how they learn best. Future research can explore how learning in solitude is positive or satisfying, and can consider the learning effectiveness of solitary

versus interactive learning, and the interaction of those conditions with particular subject matter.

This research is exploratory and descriptive of the experiences of some women learners in distance education. It is "neither exhaustive nor comprehensive" (Kottler, 1990, p. 6), but has opened the door towards challenging the notion that women primarily learn in an interactive environment. I have reflected on, and challenged, the assumption that women learn primarily by connection, relations, and collaboration; the assumption that women are considered to be isolated when studying at a distance; and the assumption of the necessity of ongoing conferencing and group work. The literature that makes reference to the connected way of learning and knowing for women should be looked upon, and presented, from a historical perspective rather than reintroducing and reinforcing this concept over and over. Women's lives have changed dramatically. We should surrender the old ideas of women's learning and welcome new and more expansive ideas. More research needs to be done specifically on women's learning styles and ways of knowing.

The two concepts referred to in this study—solitude and connection—are fundamental to a balanced, wholistic examination of distance education because no matter what the learning technology, distance learners spend a fair amount of time studying in solitude. The terms solitude and connection need to be redefined within the context of distance education for women learners. I think that the participant's voices in this study have generated new questions and understandings of women's learning, and shed new light on the places of solitude and connection within the context of distance education.

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APPENDIX A

LETTER REQUESTING PARTICIPATION

Dear

I am a graduate student in the Master of Distance Education program at Athabasca University. The purpose of my letter is to request your participation in my thesis research entitled: "*Women, distance education and solitude: A feminist postmodern narrative of women's responses to learning in solitude.*"

I am proposing to explore women distance learners' experiences with studying in solitude. There is a feminist assumption that connections and collaboration is the primary learning method for women, which I feel the MDE program is also adopting. Yet, my experience with MDE and my literature review has shown that there are women who have expressed strong verbal resistance to group work, preferring to work alone. I prefer to study in solitude and I want to understand how other women consider solitude in relation to distance education. The purpose of the project is to make sense of, and document, women's experiences with solitude in distance education. I want to add your voice/experience to the feminist distance education literature database.

Participating in this study will give you the opportunity to speak about your thoughts and experiences with solitude. My hope is that future research, curriculum theory and design will include women's experiences with solitude, and that educators and feminists will listen to what you say, acknowledge and validate your experiences with solitude and accept studying in solitude as part of the learning process.

I need a minimum of 10 participants to take part in this study. If you are interested in participating, please respond directly to me by e-mail to lwall@rockies.net with a sentence or two about your need/wish for solitude in learning. To assist, you might ask yourself if you find your work as a distance education student gives you a sense of isolation or an opportunity for solitude.

Should you decide to participate, I would like you to journalize your experiences with solitude approximately one month into the course for a period of approximately three months (February through April, 2002) once you have become familiar with the course. As the course unfolds, I would like you to journal your experiences at times that are suitable for you or as the desire or opportunity for solitude occurs or as you experience periods of solitude.

In your journals I would like you to reflect and share your experiences, apprehensions, feelings, and thoughts while studying in solitude. Since each person has their own unique way of journaling their stories, the style of journal and what you write is your choice. It is up to you to decide how much or how little information you wish to reveal. See the attached journaling guidelines that explain how to approach journaling.

Journaling can be an experience of challenging self-exploration. Should you need any support during the journaling experience, counselling staff at Athabasca University will be available to assist you. In the event that I notice something of a serious nature in your journal that I feel may indicate referral to counselling, I will bring this to your attention first and then, with your permission, discuss this with my thesis supervisor (without mentioning your name) for her assessment. It is your option to either reject or accept the counselling referral suggestions.

There are no costs to participants. Journals, along with stamped self-addressed envelopes for sending your journal to me, will be provided. Or, if you prefer, you may use the electronic journaling method and submit by e-mail.   Journals (whether paper or electronic) should be sent to me once you have completed the course.

After I have received your journals, an informal interview may take place, if necessary, to establish dialogue in a mutual attempt to clarify and expand understandings of your journal entries. Since we won't be meeting face-to-face, the informal interview will be done by way of e-mail conversations. As with your paper journal, part(s) of your e-mail conversations will be quoted verbatim in my thesis, but not without your permission first. You have the right to exclude from the study any parts of your e-mail conversations you choose. Electronic data will be stored in my computer for a period of five years, and then permanently deleted. Any printed e-mail conversations will be kept for the same length of time in a locked metal file cabinet, and then shredded. My computer is in my private study at home and I'm the only one that has the password and access to this computer.

Participation is strictly voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time. We guarantee your anonymity in the presentation of research findings. No individual, other than the researcher, will know your identity.   I would like to mention that part(s) of your story will be quoted verbatim, but I will ask for your permission first. You have the right to exclude from the study any parts of the journal you choose. Research results will be published in my thesis and possibly published in other journals, as well as presenting at conferences.

Your journals are being used strictly for research purposes only. All the data collected from you will be held in confidence and kept in a locked metal file cabinet in my locked private study. The research data (original journals and informal interview data) will be stored for a period of five years, then will be destroyed by shredding or be returned to you, if you prefer.

Debriefing will take place after review of all participant's stories with written explanations of findings sent to each participant.

Please note that participating, or not, has no effect on your student status at AU, nor on your grade in (. . .).

Thank you for considering my request. If you have any questions about the journaling exercise, or the project itself, I would be pleased to discuss it with you. I can be contacted by e-mail: lwall@rockies.net or phone call at (250) 342-0571. You may also contact my thesis supervisor Dr. Martha Cleveland-Innes, Assistant Professor at Athabasca University. Her e-mail address is: martic@athabascau.ca and phone numbers: (403) 238-3551 or (403) 620-6627 and fax number (403) 238-7762.

Sincerely,

Leslie Wall

Attachment: Journaling Guidelines

APPENDIX B

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH PROJECT

I, _____, have read and state that the purposes and procedures associated with this research project have been fully explained to me by Leslie Wall, a thesis student at Athabasca University.   Specifically, I understand that:

1. All information I give to Leslie Wall will be held in confidence and kept in a locked metal file cabinet in her locked private study. I understand that all research data will be stored for a period of five years, then destroyed either by shredding or returned to me.

2. My experiences will be written in a journal, or e-mail, and used strictly for research purposes only.

3. My experiences will be included in the thesis, but I will not be identified in the thesis document or any subsequent publications.

4. My participation in this project is voluntary and I may withdraw at any time.

5. Direct quotations from my journal, and informal interview e-mail conversations, will not be used without my permission.

6. My participation, or withdrawal of participation, has no effect on my student status at AU, nor my grade in (. . .).

7. I may be asked to voluntarily participate in an interview, but have no obligation to do so. If I decide to participate in an interview, I understand that it will be done by way of e-mail conversations.   This electronic interview data will be stored in the researcher's computer in her locked private study for a period of five years, and then permanently

deleted. Any printed e-mail conversations will be kept in a locked metal filing cabinet for the same length of time, and then shredded.

8. In the event the researcher discovers something of a serious nature during analysis of my journal (either during or after the course) that may indicate a referral to counselling is advisable, she will bring it to my attention first. If I feel that it is necessary to respond to, then she has my permission to discuss it with the thesis supervisor for assessment. I can either reject or accept any referrals to counselling. If I decide to accept counselling, it will be provided for me as long as I am a current AU student. If I decide to seek counselling during this study and then no longer have current AU student status, I understand that counselling will continue to be provided for me; or, in consultation with me, referral made to an appropriate community agency.

Name of participant _____

Signature of participant_____   Date _____

Participant contact information:

    E-mail address: _____

    Preference for correspondence: _____

APPENDIX C

JOURNALING GUIDELINES

In your journals I would like you to reflect and share your experiences, apprehensions, feelings, and thoughts while studying in solitude. This is a creative and liberating process that gives you permission to construct knowledge from your own feelings, thoughts, ideas, and observations (Gillis, 2001). For example, journal entries can be your reactions to assignment requirements that expect collaboration with other participants; or, simply describe why you prefer to study in solitude; or, you might begin with a phrase 'what would studying in solitude be like if I had a room of my own where I could study without interruptions'.

Journal only what you think matters, or write down whatever comes to mind. Be authentic and spontaneous and put down your thoughts in a purposeful focus. It is not necessary to edit or rewrite, just put down your thoughts with enough clarity to avoid interviewer interference. The journal is simply expressing what you think or feel. You should simply write your journal as if you were writing to yourself, as if no one else will ever read it. Doing so will encourage your spontaneity and freedom as a writer.

You need not be concerned with any specific form. Each person has their own style of journaling or unique way of expressing themselves on paper. Therefore, the style of journaling is up to you. It can either be a simple daily or weekly diary, filled in at a time that is convenient to you; morning pages (Cameron, 1992); learning journal; electronic journal; or a mixed genre approach consisting of pictures, photographs, poetry, narratives, and field notes; or an audio taped account of your own story.

APPENDIX D

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Describe your actual space and physical surroundings of your learning activity. Does it make a difference whether you have your own physical space rather than a kitchen table?

2. Under what conditions do you prefer solitude or connected learning (group work)?

3. How can distance education assist you in studying alone?

4. What are your strategies for coping and excelling in a solitary environment?

5. How do you think your experiences with studying in solitude contribute to your personal development and empowerment?

6. How do you think distance education can contribute to independent learning without increasing reliance on group-based learning?

7. How do you think learning in solitude can build confidence, self-esteem and independence?

8. Do you think confidence and self-esteem play a role in who will cope better in solitude? Explain.

9. What are your perceptions of interaction?

10. Are women conforming to the prescription of feminist pedagogy and distance education; that is, are they unwillingly conforming to cooperative learning or are they willing participants?

11. Why do you prefer to study in solitude?

12. How does learning in solitude impact you?

13. Do you register under the assumption that distance education is studying in solitude? Explain.

14. Does computer technology intimidate you? If so, does this want to make you want to study in solitude, or is it your personal preference.

15. Does the type of course and requirement that you are registered in dictate whether or not you prefer solitude or group work?

16. How would you describe your learning style?

17. How would you describe your experience with studying in solitude?

18. Do you think that studying in solitude is a barrier?

19. How would you describe your experience as a distance learner?

20. What personal attributes can studying at a distance provide?

21. Do you think that solitude could be a step towards to achieving independence and self-knowledge?