Women studying at a distance: what do they need to succeed?
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Helene Hipp, Study Adviser at the Flexible Learning Centre, University of South Australia, presents in this article the results of research into women distance education students and preferred modes of student support. Drawing on feminist perspectives, the author frames conclusions around the issues of confidence, overcoming isolation, and connected teaching.

The University of South Australia, located in Adelaide, South Australia, has a total student enrolment of about 23,000 students. Of these 3,858 or 16 per cent are enrolled in the distance mode and they study in over 50 courses throughout the University. Women comprise 2,734 or 71 per cent of this external enrolment (University of South Australia statistics, May 1996).

The writer in 1994/95 researched the support needs of women studying at a distance at the associate diploma level as part of her Master's thesis. Men were excluded from the study not because it was thought their support needs were unimportant but because the University of South Australia, as many other tertiary institutions, is largely male constructed and developed with the male student as the norm (Mies 1983) and it was felt that it was necessary to allow women's voices to be heard to ascertain what it is they need in order to function successfully at a tertiary level.

Distance education has been seen as a way to get more women into tertiary education by overcoming the barriers of distance, time and multiple commitments. The issue however, is not merely equal access of women to education but equity for them once in the system. It has been well documented (Faith 1988; Grace 1991 a and b; and Burge and Lenskyi 1990) that a system which is male-dominated and does not take into account women's requirements will not automatically ensure equality of outcome. Universities must ensure support is available for all students once access is gained.

Burge (in Faith 1988, p.ix) has suggested both long and short term goals in relation to women in distance education. In the long term there is a need for an integration of distance research and practice which acknowledges 'gender related and feminist issues in writing and research'. In the short term there is a need for' wider recognition of the experiences of women students and educators with the chance taken at every opportunity to raise the realities and the problems' faced by women in distance education. The research aimed to address these long and short term goals and in addition come up with some recommendations on how women studying externally at the associate diploma level could be better supported at the University of South Australia.

Current support for students studying in distance mode

The University of South Australia has historically used a highly centralised support system. The development and delivery of external courses has been largely directed by the Flexible Learning Centre (formerly the Distance Education Centre) based at the Underdale campus. The type of support offered has been, using King and Forster's (1985) definition, 'direct and universal' with some individual support in conjunction with other units such as the Educational Support Services and the library staff. In addition there is some indirect support facilitated by the University in the form of sending out a student register containing names and contact details of students in the same geographical location who agree to be contacted by other students.

The centralised universal support has an administrative and an academic arm. The administrative support for students is extensive and includes enrolment, payment of fees, materials dispatch, course changes, assignment traffic, information giving and, in some cases, student advocacy. Students are able to ring a toll-free number and ask questions about their studies and if these cannot be answered by the academic advisers they will be directed to someone else who is able to help.

Centralised universal support is also offered via the academics in the Flexible Learning Centre (FLC). The study advisers in the FLC have a central role in 'humanising' the institution and providing a student centred focus. They have as their main goal the maintenance of an academic environment which encourages academic development and personal growth in students. Currently study advisers run an annual one-day orientation programme available for all new distance education students with input from the FLC, library, Educational Support Services and the External Student Union. The orientation is held on two campuses, one in the city and one at a non-metropolitan campus, usually at the end of the first week of semester one on a Saturday. The programme aims to:

·   give information about the types of support available to students;
·   alert students to the structure and embedded processes found in the distance education materials;
·   illuminate the unique aspects of learners that may facilitate or inhibit academic progress (Alman 1990);
·   provide information and practice skills needed to successfully negotiate tertiary study.

In order to provide orientation on a broader basis for new distance education students a project was undertaken in 1993 by the FLC, library and External Student Union to provide an orientation package which is sent out to all new students with the enrolment packages. The package consists of a 20 minute video outlining the structure of the university and the support services students can access within this, a booklet' Learning resources for students studying at a distance' at either undergraduate or postgraduate level and a small booklet containing names and contact details of support people in various areas.

In addition to these two main ways of having contact with distance education students the study advisers meet with some individuals on a one-to-one basis, usually via a phone appointment although face-to-face appointments can be made for local students. Study advisers also have some input into teleconferences with some subject academics and are involved with weekend workshops and run summer schools.

The FLC academics and production staff operate in an advisory role to academics writing distance education course materials. They provide guidance and assistance in order to help academics make their distance education materials student centred - therefore providing support within the materials. The success of this varies considerably from course to course and even within courses from lecturer to lecturer.

The library is also part of the central universal support provided for distance education students at the University of South Australia. The distance education division has a very extensive, responsive service which supplies library materials to students outside the Adelaide metropolitan area. Metropolitan students are expected to use the library in person at one of the six campuses.

Feminist perspective

The aim of the research was to explore the support offered to women distance education students at the University of South Australia and the possibility that what was offered did not best suit their needs. When thinking about the research and methodology the writer wanted to maintain a feminist perspective so a set of guiding principals was established to accomplish this. These principles fit with those identified by Linton (1992:276):

·   women are the active central focus;
·   the main method used will incorporate group participation;
·   issues affecting women are identified and strategies for action are developed;
·   there is an open, inclusive, accessible creative dynamic process between people, among activities or in relation to ideas, and
·   there is a commitment to respect and include women's ideas, theories, experiences and action strategies from diverse experiences that appear to be, and sometimes are, in conflict.

Once these guidelines were established it was important that the methods used would not only best answer the research questions but also be consistent with broad feminist goals.

The research

The research was accomplished by surveying all women in the targeted associate diplomas to gain an overview of the students in the research group and identifying the support needs they had. Once the support needs had been broadly identified through the survey data then a more 'human' perspective was provided by group interviews.

The Survey

All women (N=127) enrolled externally in the four targeted associate diplomas were surveyed to gain an overview of the target group and their support needs. There was a response rate of 52 per cent.

The survey established demographic data about the group, ascertained what sorts of support the students had accessed as students of the University, whether the support had been of value, where there had been minimal or no support and the areas where more support was needed. This survey information provided an overview of the students in the study and highlighted a number of issues which formed the basis of the interviews.

Group interviews

Mies suggests a shift away from individual interviews to group discussions which was taken up in the research. She claims that group discussion helps women students 'to overcome their structural isolation ... and to understand that their individual sufferings have social causes' (1983: 128). This overcoming of isolation is particularly important for distance education students who have the added isolation of being distant from both their institution and other students. Lather also advocates group interviews as having the potential for deepening a 'reciprocally educative encounter' (1991:22). In addition group interviews enable participants to see the possibility of interpreting difficulties, problems and inadequacies not as an effect of individual, personal failings but as a result of socially produced structures...' (Weedon 1993:85).
The research used the group interview/discussion method utilising teleconferencing as the means. Even though the teleconferences were conducted as discussion, with students picking up on other`s comments, all students got to give an answer to each question - following an interview format.
For the interviews 16 women responded to a request for interviewees which went out with the survey. They were divided into in four award-specific groups of four.
The women interviewed were diverse in terms of both their demographic details and their studies. They ranged in age from 19-55 years and lived in a variety of locations from metropolitan Adelaide to country South Australia and interstate. They also varied in their current year of study (from first to fourth year), previous tertiary experience and study and work loads. One was a school leaver, the others were mature-age entrants.

Interview 1
The first interview/discussion covered how the women felt when they began their studies, what support they needed, what support they received and how this support could have better 'fitted' them and their circumstances.
A precis of some of the extensive interview data gives an overview of the findings.
Most students felt scared, apprehensive and nervous about beginning their studies.

Feelings ranged from mild apprehension to absolute terror. Isolation and fear of failure also featured largely. Comments were typified by:

· I felt insecure. 1 wondered if I had the ability to do it.
· I was overwhelmed and 1 actually thought very long and hard about quitting.
· I can remember getting my parcel from the university and I was terrified - absolutely terrified in fear of failure.
· I felt totally by myself.
· I had virtually no idea of who I could turn to.

Those who had studied before were more confident:

· I knew what was in front of me ... that you really have to change your whole lifestyle to cope with it and that the commitment you have to make is great.

Most students also had a very negative view of themselves and their abilities to cope with tertiary studies. Again the fear of failure featured:

· I felt insecure in terms of ability to take on tertiary study. I didn't really have a lot of confidence in my ability, I guess, in my intellect and intelligence.

· I didn't know how well I was going to perform ... really scared of failing.

Students were asked what helped them to better adjust to being a tertiary student. Nearly all the answers had to do with understanding what was expected and having some sort of personal communication with the university. Some' found their voice' as a communicator and this helped them to gain confidence.

· I learnt to speak up. I learnt a bit about talking about what I believed and trusting my opinions a little bit more. 1 was very, very hesitant at that stage I was still very insecure in my abilities.

When asked if they felt there had been a turning point to enable a view of themselves as a confident student most tied it to receiving their first assignments back or gradually having more positive comments on their work as they worked out what was expected of them. Interestingly only one student saw her turning point as something she had control over and which she could positively influence. This came as a result of personal development outside of her university studies which gave her more' personal power'.

· I made a huge shift in my personal development [through work] and it was those outside changes that impacted on how I saw myself as a student. I became more assertive and began to act with more personal power and feel my own ability and was less fearful and learned how to ask for what 1 wanted. I guess that spilled over into my studies. I wouldn't agonise so much about ringing lecturers ... so I was less fearful in life in general and also in terms of

my studies. I was a bit more confident in my abilities and I began to trust my intellect a bit more. I saw myself differently in relation to my studies.

The overall picture which emerged from this data, with only a few exceptions such as the above, is of a group of women who feel powerless, fearful and are only able to have themselves and their worth confirmed and judged by authorities outside of themselves (the university). Their self-esteem, although slowly improving is tied to their marks and the lecturer's comments about their work. An inordinate amount of time is spent in finding out what the lecturer wants. The task of the university then is to assist these women to find their voices and their personal power so that they experience life and their studies more as the final student quoted above.

The students were asked to make suggestions on how the University could better help with adjustment to becoming a successful tertiary student. The majority of students wanted some sort of personal contact with the University to humanise their studies. This was suggested in a number of ways including personal contact with lecturers and other staff, teleconferences and the facilitation of student-to-student contact.

·   It would be lovely for the lecturer to just ring out of the blue in the beginning of the semester ... introducing themselves ... A lot of time and effort and commitment is required to do well in university and you need that little bit of acknowledgement ... It's just that encouragement I think.
·   One of the lecturers wrote a letter when we first started, a personal letter ... and she talked about herself as a person ... it made it feel like this person was not just a lecturer on a pedestal, this was actually a human being that you could talk to at any time.
·   Teleconferences are definitely the way to go because you do feel that you have contact with someone else.

The fact that students want more support in the form of personal contact with lecturers has been documented in a number of other studies (Thompson 1989). There seems to be an overwhelming need to connect and feel valued in these students. The University provides support the lecturers are given information on how having personal contact with students enhances learning, and still many students feel unsupported and alone in their studies. The crux of the matter may lie with one of the student's observations:

·   It's one thing to say that all these resources are available to students but it's another thing to feel confident and able to use them without feeling like you are using the system. I think students need to be made aware that these people ... are available, are there for every student and there's no problem in using them.

 How this confidence is to be fostered is an issue for the university to grapple with.

Interview 2

The second round of interviews focused on an article by Clinchy et al (1985)' Connected Education for Women'. Guiding questions were given to encourage the women to think about what the article and connected education meant to them and how they preferred to interact with the university and their learning. This article espoused in particular the midwife' model of education where knowledge and ideas are drawn out by making the students' own tacit knowledge explicit and elaborating it' (1985: 41). The gist of the article can be seen in its last paragraph:

> We believe that most women want and need an education in which connection is emphasised over separation, understanding and acceptance over judgement and assessment, and collaboration over debate ... They need a system which, instead of imposing its own expectation and arbitrary requirements, helps them to define their own questions and evolve their own patterns of work for pursuing these questions. (Clinchy et al 1985: 44)

Students were asked if this article rang true for them. The majority of students related very strongly and positively to the article. For many the issue of women's lack of confidence rang most true:

· It was very true the way a lot of women don`t have a lot of confidence in their own opinions that we want to hear or have it reinforced that yes, we are right ... We don't stand up for ourselves and say this is what 1 feel ... We don't get a lot of support ... having opinions valued.
· Women don`t have a lot of confidence in their own ability.

One discussed the issue of the model of teaching often used in universities as being unsuitable for women:

· It rang true for me ... it said that the doubting model was inappropriate for women ... the adversary tearing down of people's beliefs and their substance, in a sense, I don't think that works for women in an educational role.

One student had already read Belenky et al's 'Women's ways of knowing' (1986), which followed from the article by Clinchy et al, and had been solidly confirmed by what it said. Another was keen to read more after seeing the article:

· I found it very inspiring actually. It made things a lot clearer for me. 1 guess I have been feeling that 1 have been struggling through my first year so it actually made me feel a little bit more confident.

Students were then asked to comment on their experience of the 'midwife' model of education.
The comments from students ranged widely. Some felt that they had not experienced this model in their studies:

·   Since I have been at university 1 don't feel I have had very much support at all from the lecturers ... I don't think they know me well enough to know what knowledge I've got and I think that is really sad.

Some also talked about feeling they had to regurgitate the material back without much original thought of their own:

·   My experience for a lot of the time was that 1 felt like 1 was just producing stuff, producing the goods.
·   You get penalised for writing down what you feel ... It's got to be black and white, there's no maybe.

Many students saw that there was a combination of 'banking' and 'midwife' models in distance education:

·   They do give you the deposits of information in your readings and study guides but also a lot of questions they ask you to find a lot of information for yourself.
·   I think it has to do a lot with the actual student themselves. You can be presented with a piece of information and it is up to you the way you present it to the lecturers whether you do it in either method.

One student was most excited by the' midwife' method in her final project claiming that the particular lecturer was:

·   incredibly skilled in drawing out that knowledge for me ... it was a really productive time and I felt really good about my contribution, it was self-directed learning and he was just really encouraging me.

However she goes on to admit that teachers have to have:

·   incredible skill to do that instead of locking into their particular point of view for their comfort.

This, from the discussion, appears to be a rare thing in the students' experience.
A number of students saw that the external mode offered the 'midwife' model which face-to-face teaching did not:

·   [With distance education] you can use the midwife method because you are responsible for finding out and you can put your own thing into it whereas if you have someone standing there talking they are depositing information and later on it will be extracted.
·   Being a distance education student you have to go out and do the research yourself which sometimes is a bit harder but it broadens your mind because the onus is on you to find out that information and not being spoon-fed.

For one student this way of looking at distance education made her reassess her own perceptions:

·   That is a new thought for me. I presumed because we were given the booklets and the readings that that was a type of banking learning and we were having to regurgitate it. That is a new thought ... certainly a lot of leeway for us to draw on our own experience and put in our own opinions and our own learning.

Later this same woman - still musing about her discovery, epitomised what many women had been saying about the way women learn through discussion and reflection:

·   It's very interesting you can do a lot of reflection. You can think it is one way then someone says something and you can see the other way.

The notion of connected teaching where members of the student group' are not mere spectators, they actively nurture each other's ideas' (Clinchy et al 1985: 41) was discussed and the viability of this in distance education was considered. Teleconferences were seen as an essential element in the attempt to foster connected teaching to form some sort of community:

·   It's great to be able to listen to other people's opinions and attitudes and see how they are finding it.
·   Just talking to others is really important.
·   It is difficult to have connection because it's a distance thing ... which is in opposition to connectedness, but I relish it when it happens as in the teleconferences.
·   I don't think connected teaching can be gone into in distance education unless the lecturer finds the time to have teleconferences every few months, otherwise ... it wouldn't work.

However, there were some reservations:

·   The only way that teleconferences can work to enable some connected teaching to occur is if you have an established group ... who you worked with over a reasonable period of time so that people built up those comfort levels and were prepared to take risks and share their uncertainty and that kind of rapport is hard to establish over the phone. But I am encouraged by the possibility that this could happen just from the conversations that we have had.
·   1 don't think you can get personal until you can get to know people and in a group it is very difficult to find your comfort level.

There were some comments on why connected learning in the form of teleconferences might not always be ideal:

·   I don't want to have an ongoing thing every week where it's a full time commitment because that's the whole idea of external studies so that you can work at your own pace.

· Some people just wouldn't want the connected learning. It depends on the individual.

Finally, students were asked whether being involved in the research had been a useful experience. Nearly all women agreed strongly that being involved in the research had effected them positively. The notion of not being alone was mentioned by many as part of the answer:

· This has been a positive thing for me because I have been able to relate to other people and I know that they are out there doing the course. Benefits all round hearing other people's points of view and what problems they have had along the way.
just to be able ... to know you are not alone.
· There are lots of other women out there doing the same thing and achieving what they set out to do ... very positive and rewarding. It's the most enjoyable teleconference I have ever had.
· [The teleconferences] make me a bit more enthusiastic about getting down to some study. 1 feel if 1 had some relationship with other people studying at the university I would probably do better in my work. I'd probably be more enthusiastic.
· I've been a lot more attentive to the way things run, and what sort of a response I get from the university.
· I think I would be more willing to contact the lecturer now.

And the final telling statement:

· Thank you to you for listening to us.

Issues

This research has highlighted a number of issues which need to be considered to ensure that women distance education students are being given the support that they need to succeed and flourish.

Confidence and finding their voice

The issue of women's lack of confidence and low self-esteem on returning to tertiary study is one which was very obvious in the interviews and is also common in the literature (Thompson 1983; Willen 1988; Coulter 1989). For a variety of reasons including schooling experience, societal mores and personal experience many women exhibit extreme lack of confidence when beginning tertiary study. This lack of confidence appears to continue for many even after they have some of the 'trappings' of success with high marks for assignments and positive comments from their lecturers. Many continue to believe that this is 'just a fluke' or the lecturer 'feels sorry for her'.

Tied in closely with the confidence issue is what Belenky et al call 'finding their voices' (1986: 29). They ask the question 'What does a woman need to know?' and answer:

> she needs to know that she is capable of intelligent thought, and she needs to know it right away.

Once she knows this she is able to find and use her voice to ensure she continues to grow and develop.

The majority of the women in the research had begun their studies by taking in what the lecturer (or study guides) said and desperately trying to work out what the lecturer wanted to get back. They did not have the confidence or 'voice' to do more than that. Many students had some turning point which gave them the confidence to begin to listen to themselves and trust their own experience more. However, these women still saw themselves in terms of how they measured up to external standards.

At the next stage of 'finding their voice' according to Belenky et al women engage in 'conscious, deliberate, systematic analysis' (1986: 93). They are practical, pragmatic problem solvers' (1986: 99). Many of the women in the study were moving towards this position of having a stronger voice as their confidence increased.

Only one woman in the research group had gone beyond this to integrate and accept the knowledge that she felt intuitively with the knowledge she received from others. She had moved into new ways of thinking and moved outside of the frames and systems which exist to make her own. She had come to the insight that 'all knowledge is constructed and the knower is an intimate part of the known' (Belenky et al 1986: 137). Interestingly it was something outside her studies that caused her shift and allowed her to begin trusting her own feelings and actions. She had a very strong 'voice' and was clear about who she was and what she hoped to achieve.

One way of increasing confidence and selfesteem could be to run workshops, teleconferences or develop self-help materials for students to work through. In addition teaching staff in individual subjects need to be encouraged to give positive and constructive feedback on student's work to ensure confidence is enhanced rather than further eroded. For many students in the study a turning point in their confidence level came with positive, personal feedback from their lecturers.

With an increase in confidence women can also find a stronger voice in their learning. They can begin to do more than simply give the lecturer what he or she wants and start reclaiming and integrating their own knowledge and meshing it with what others are saying and writing. In this way their learning becomes more insightful, challenging and rewarding.

Overcoming isolation

The preference women have for shared learning has been well documented (Oudshoom 1988; Coulter 1989; Kirkup and Von Prümrner 1990) and there is a need for the university to somehow foster this sharing.

Two points were raised in relation to this in the interviews. Firstly, not all women want the interaction. Some prefer to work in isolation with the materials and find this satisfying. Secondly, there needs to be care exercised to structure and moderate the interaction effectively:

Increased learner interaction is not an inherently or self-evidently positive educational goal or strategy. In essence, more interaction is not necessarily better. Women need to be persuaded that collaborative learning can be integral to, and beneficial and attainable in distance education contexts. (May 1993: 47)

Another important point raised by the students and again reflected in the literature (Grace 1991b1Hughes 1989) is that students need to communicate with the university and each other in order to establish a strong identity within the university culture. This also helps them to acknowledge their role as a student.

This interaction can be achieved in a variety of ways by teleconference, written comments or electronic means, not just face-to-face. As noted earlier, one of the outcomes of the group teleconference interviews was that the women, some for the first time, realised that there were others studying in their subject who were having the same doubts and difficulties and grappling with many of the same issues. For many of them this was very confirming and encouraged them that they were on the right track.

The researcher in 1996 trialed another form of interaction using the University Voicemail system to broadcast information about studying, assignment preparation and writing. Although this was non-contiguous communication, feedback from students indicated this was very useful and because they heard a 'real' voice over the phone they felt that they had a personal connection with the University. They were also able to leave messages for the study adviser if more personal replies re required.

Computer communication, for those who have access, could be another form of personal communication between the students and the University student to student. This is being investigated trialed in 1997.

Connected teaching

Connected teaching as espoused by Clinchy et al 1985) appears to fit many women students' needs.

Many of the students interviewed saw the distance education materials as already following that structure. However, a number of students had had disturbing experiences of lecturers who used the adversary role to the extreme and 'tore down their being' with destructive comments on assignments. Other students had had varying degrees of connected teaching in a variety of ways and had felt most satisfied with their learning when high degrees of connected teaching were apparent and they found their voices as students because they had the opportunity for reflection and critical analysis.

This is an area that needs to be widened to all students of the University. Staff developers within the FLC are working with faculty academic staff to ensure that teaching is maintained at a high standard and that flexible learning is incorporated at all levels to enable students to achieve their goals.

Conclusion

Burge (1988, p.vii), in the introduction to Faith's book on women in international distance education, notes:

> After over 100 years of formal distance education, we confront the darkness of the unwritten experience of women as distance education learners and educators.

The research sought to enlighten one small portion of this darkness by exploring undergraduate women's experience of support in their studies at the University of South Australia.

One cannot draw hard and fast conclusions from this study. However, the data collected does show some distinct patterns and suggests some recommendations for improving support for women distance education students. From these interpretations and patterns it may be possible to explore these results more widely and in different settings in the future.

In order to ascertain the sorts of education and support appropriate to women's needs it is necessary to understand and know more about their experiences. We need to know about their education and learning, self image, personal changes and growth and relationships of importance to them. We also need to know their perceived catalysts for change and impediments to growth (Belenky et al 1986: 12). There needs to be a consistent approach so that it is not simply left to chance whether or not support is available:

Dahlloff suggests that:

> students should be provided with support and feedback in a flexible way when they need it most and in a form that is adapted as much as possible to their specific situation and the types of problems that they individually encounter in the phase of integration and mental digestion. (1985 reported in Anwyl et al 1987:142)

By adding ways of supporting students that are based on women's ways of knowing and learning to the repertoire of support already available it ensures that all students have an opportunity to access effective support which is tailored to them.

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