Female Students as Online Learners:  
A Case Study in Navigating Academic Success  
Dr. Noreen Powers

Abstract

This qualitative study investigated and described the relationship between the various challenges women face in a distance learning program and their other life events using a feminist and phenomenological approach. The primary purpose of this case study was to examine the narratives of three women to determine how adult women students in an online program navigate through the challenges they encounter as they move through this educational venue. This study addresses the following questions: (1) What are the challenges to online learning for these adult female students? (2) How do these adult female online students negotiate their challenges? (3) How can distance education be designed with greater alignment to women’s lives?

The findings of this study suggest that distance education succeeds in extending educational opportunities to women, however, there are still many challenges that exist. Women in this study have been effected by gender expectations put on them by society, their families and themselves. These women spoke of existing pressures and stereotypes they felt prior to adding the responsibility of being a student to their financial responsibilities. Finally, they spoke of ways in which they overcame these barriers in order to find their way in a distance learning program, and how their particular learning styles and being self-directed has benefited them in their pursuit of higher education. The findings in this study, at this fundamental level, can make the materials and methodology of distance learning far more efficient in helping adult women distance learners further their education and continue their academic success.

Universities with developing distance education programs would benefit greatly from knowledge of the lived experiences of these women students, which would, in turn, give them a better understanding of what is required for them to be successful in their academic pursuits. While this study is a starting point for looking at the experiences of women learners in a distance learning program, further research is needed.