Gender as an Issue in Distance Education

Karlene Faith

Introduction

During the 1980s, feminist concerns have surfaced in distance education communities worldwide. The Women's International Network (WIN), affiliated with the International Council for Distance Education (ICDE) and chaired by Ms. Elizabeth Burge, of OISE, has developed as a global organizational base for women in the various distance education professions. At the 1985 ICDE meetings three women were elected to serve on the Executive Committee. A forthcoming book, *Toward New Horizons: International Perspectives on Women in Distance Education* (K. Faith, Ed., London: Croom Helm, 1988), featuring articles by contributors from thirteen nations, focuses on developing more gender-inclusive approaches to distance education. Numerous post-secondary institutions globally have initiated the development of women's studies courses for distance learners. (In Canada, for example, these institutions include Mount Saint Vincent University, University of Saskatchewan, Athabasca University and Simon Fraser University.) Among the topics to be discussed at the 1988 meetings of the Canadian Association for Distance Education (CADE) is "Gender—what are the issues?"

All of these initiatives show a determination that distance educators shall begin to take gender into account. In the transformation of education toward more egalitarian models, it is essential to make authentically visible any group which has been heretofore ignored, distorted and/or vilified. For example, students must find themselves accurately represented in course materials. It is relatedly essential that gender-inclusive language be the norm. Beyond the basic need to be simply present, feminists are identifying numerous ways that distance educators can actively involve themselves in the gender question. Among the issues being raised are the following:

a. Revision of our approaches to course development and delivery so as to ensure that androcentric bias no longer dominates course design, content or tutorial style.

b. Investigation of students' course and program selections and, where warranted, development of programs to encourage female participation in traditionally male subject areas—especially in math, the sciences and uses of technology.

c. Recognition that most adult female learners need assistance in planning vocational goals and choosing study programs appropriate to those goals, if we are to contribute to the undoing of the "feminization of poverty."

d. Appreciation of the reality that many female students, including those who are employed, have primary or sole responsibility as parents, a factor which has an enormous effect on study patterns.

e. Consideration of female students' unique needs in the planning and provision of student support services—including counselling which takes into account the fact that female students commonly suffer from low self-esteem.

Clearly, to some people at least, the gender factor is crucial to any serious discussion of the future of distance education. This reality was underscored by several incidents I experienced while attending a distance education counselling workshop in September, 1987, held at Cambridge University and very successfully organized by Alan Tait of the Open University. These incidents are described below, with commentary, in the interest of increasing dialogue among Canadian colleagues. They offer examples of how, at this nascent stage of analyzing distance education in feminist terms, the issue of gender is met with responses ranging from support and understanding to condescension and antagonism.

Reverse Discrimination?

During the open discussion of one of the early sessions at Cambridge, when the question arose as to whether female students have needs that are not shared by male students, one particular man revealed himself as a hostile skeptic of feminist analysis. On the following day, approximately thirty female delegates gathered for a WIN meeting, to plan sessions for the 1988 ICDE conference. Halfway through the meeting this same man suddenly entered the room, curiously apologizing for arriving so late due to "other demands" on his time. His presence evoked an awkward silence, broken by one of the delegates who articulated the feelings of most of those present in explaining to him why the meeting was suitably restricted to women. He protested vigorously that he had every right to be there, with one of the women vocally supporting him. A vote was called and everyone in the room, save the man in question and his one supporter, voted for his departure. The woman who defended him then stated that she was not willing to discriminate against anyone, man or woman alike; since he had to leave so would she, on principle, and she did.

Perhaps this man was simply being mischievous, wanting to test the reaction of the women's group to his male presence. However, it seemed that he genuinely lacked any understanding of why women would feel a need to independently discuss sensitive issues that affected them "as women." Apparently lacking an

historical analysis of gender as it relates to status and power differential, he had no basis for comprehending challenges to categorical subordination based on sex. To some of the women in the group, his domineering attitude was simply "typically male." In fact, he was not typical of the men at that conference, the majority of whom gave respectful attention to feminist issues. He did symbolize, however, the crucial need for dialogue among male/female colleagues in order to distinguish between those who (for the purpose of argument) 1) believe in and are committed to status quo male dominance, i.e. patriarchists; 2) are tacitly accepting of female presence but who are uncritical or unaware of the obstacles women face in the public as well as the private sphere, i.e. liberals; or 3) recognize and are actively and vocally opposed to sexist attitudes and traditions, i.e. feminists.

Pulling Rank?

One of the best-attended and most dynamic sessions at Cambridge was a presentation by Christine von Prummer, of the FernUniversität, who discussed her research on the reasons why female students select certain courses of study over others. At the conclusion of her presentation, an esteemed and elder distance educator positioned himself in front of the podium, facing the audience with his back to, and blocking our view of, Ms. von Prummer. By assuming a posture of dominance, both physically and in his remarks—which took the form of rejecting von Prummer's analysis out-of-hand—this gentleman stunningly demonstrated precisely some of the points von Prummer was making about female experience within male-dominated environments. In effect, he dismissed her with the patronizing tones reserved for "subordinates," and assumed his "rightful" place as The Authority—even though she was clearly the expert on the topic, and a highly respected scholar in her own right. The crowded room was filled with a palpable sense of embarrassment, which was eased when a woman in the audience offered an elegantly succinct analysis of what had just transpired. The ensuing discussion, including important contributions from delegates representing developing nations, further crystallized the issues of gender behaviour as metaphor for the subtle as well as the blatant ways that hierarchies are preserved, even among professional peers.

"Old-Girls" Network???

On the last evening of the conference I was alarmed, during a dinner conversation, to hear a woman nearing retirement age comment that she was delighted to observe that women in distance education were finally organizing an "old-girls network," to challenge the male counterpart. This notion may have some appeal to those who accept power struggles as the fundamental means by which individuals or groups achieve their goals, and for whom hierarchical authority is a static model from which elites inevitably emerge. The feminism I believe in, however, is an implicitly democratic ideology which challenges the

social inequities accrued from power imbalances. The dominance of the few over the many is as contradictory to the principles of feminism as is the subordination of human groups on the basis of, for example, sex, class, race or ethnicity. Whereas leadership may be an essential component of social organization, there is a significant distinction between responsible leadership and self-serving elitist governance of the kind practiced by "old-boys" networks.

In the specific context of women in distance education, we have indeed been blessed with responsible leadership; that is, a number of women in Canada and in many other nations have taken the initiative to conduct research, develop courses and student services, establish programs, organize WIN, generate policies and communicate with colleagues in various ways to ensure that both in our work with students and in our professional interactions we are not colluding with sexist traditions. These initiatives would collapse, however, without support from countless numbers of women *and* men, students as well as educators.

Feminism, both in theory and practice, is imbued with a spirit of collectivity that by definition rejects individualism as a means toward social progress, while at the same time advocating increased choice and autonomy for the individual. The (perhaps utopian) ethos is based not on uniformity but rather on rewarding individuals for contributing to the good of the community as a whole.

I share my colleague's delight in observing that women are becoming more visible in the distance education enterprise. However, I trust that this favourable development will not result in a self-appointed elitist clique which presumes to speak for the interests of the majority. Rather than compete with patriarchal paradigms, it is perhaps time to revive that early second-wave feminist slogan, "Sisterhood is Powerful!," and to understand that slogan in universal terms.

On the Bright Side!

The final session of the conference was a review of the events of the week with an eloquent summary and commentary presented by a delegate from a developing African nation. Toward the conclusion of his remarks he commented thoughtfully on how he had been especially impressed by the attention given in various meetings to issues of concern to women. Moreover, he said that having now been alerted to the gender-specific needs of distance education students, he intended to implement new policies in his own program which would take female students' needs into account. With quiet dignity, he conveyed such pure understanding that he evoked in many of us a feeling of sheer astonishment, all the more so because he was prepared to *act* on it. As a friend put it, "The remarkable thing about what he said is that it should be so remarkable." Feminist women are commonly poised for a response of defensiveness, hostility or indifference from men when the subject of women's liberation is raised; it comes as a wonderfully encouraging surprise when a man reckons on his own initiative with the implications of feminism and shows a commitment to breaking with

sexist traditions. This gentleman's words rang as courageous and clear-sighted, embracing the fundamental recognition that an egalitarian philosophy and practice would benefit all of humanity.

Postscript

By way of closing, I offer a letter from a prospective distance education student. She is in many ways the "typical female student" with whom most of us are familiar, though she is perhaps more confident than most. If we can meet our mandate to provide her with a good education we are probably doing a good job on behalf of all of our students.

> The reasons I wish to embark on a (university) education program are quite simple. At the age of 17 the idea of spending another four or five years studying was horrendous, so when a job was offered to me during year eleven, I seized the opportunity and left school. At the time it seemed like the right thing to do; now, however, I feel as though I have missed out, and would like to remedy this.
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> My present situation is quite different. I have left the work force and now have a husband and two small children. Motherhood is a very rewarding job and I thoroughly enjoy it, but I do not intend making a career of it. After spending the last two-and-a-half years changing nappies and feeding babies I feel the need for some extra stimulation.
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> At the moment I do not have a particular interest in any academic fields, but am sure those will develop when I commence study. Neither do I have any idea what I would do with a B.A. degree if I were to obtain one. I only know that although I am happy and quite satisfied with my lot at the moment, I do not want to be left with no options and a lot of empty days to fill when my children have grown up and no longer need my around-the-clock attention.
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> I now feel I have the time and capabilities to complete a course off campus over a period of six to eight years and, hopefully, obtain a degree. Once obtained, this would greatly enhance any career options and lead on to bigger and better things.

Karlene Faith
Simon Fraser University
Canada