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The Third Shift: Women learning online

Author: Kramarae, C. (2001). *The Third Shift: Women learning online*. Washington, DC.: American Association of University Women Educational Foundation. 86 pages, paperback. ISBN: 1 8799 2229 0

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According to numbers cited in the introduction to this fascinating and useful study, in the United States in 2002 more than two million students are expected to enrol in distance learning courses (read 'online courses' – the terms are conflated in this study). Of these millions, the average student is 34 years old, employed part-time, has previous college credit—and is female. Cheri Kramarae calls this “a social phenomenon,” and has led the research on which this publication is based in order to document these women’s assessments of their experiences and concerns. The hope is that awareness of women’s problems and actions required to help overcome them will increase the women’s success in online programs.

The term “third shift” is a metaphor that builds on sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild’s use of “second shift” to describe the domestic, family and community work that women come home to when they finish their time at the office or factory. Education, Kramarae explains, is a third shift for many of these women. In this report, women students describe how they grapple individually, often in isolation, with time constraints that hinder them in fitting distance learning into their already packed work and family lives. These women also talk about why they pursue this third shift, how they manage the balance amongst competing demands, and what would make distance learning easier for them.

The report is divided into five parts. Part One is an introduction in which terms are defined, rationales and context for the research are provided, and the methodology is briefly described. In Part Two we learn from study participants why they have taken up online learning, and about their preferences, experiences, and learning styles. These learners reflect on the extent to which online learning is a last resort, and the type of student to whom it is best suited. Part Three deals with the barriers these learners encounter. These barriers – costs, age, time demands, family factors, and accreditation—will come as no surprise to experienced distance educators; nonetheless it is valuable to have them documented once again, this time in the context of online learning. Part Four takes up the issue of whether computer-mediated communication really is the great equalizer that its proponents have claimed. The answer provided by the participants in this study is that clearly no. In their experience, no gender differences in communication patterns, styles and dynamics persist in virtual environments. This section alone, documenting these differences, makes the book worth purchasing. The report closes with a set of conclusions and recommendations. These are useful, but again, they will come as no surprise to experienced distance educators.

The methodology of the research on which the report is based is both its strength and weakness. This is a qualitative rather than quantitative study. I found the reasons the author provides for this approach convincing, but those who hunger for numbers are likely to remain unsatisfied. We

benefit from hearing the study participants' voices; the report contains a wealth of quotations from their responses to the online questionnaires (carefully designed and tested) that comprised the main research tool. In addition, the researchers wisely included some men in their study population. Unfortunately, the report does not clearly distinguish between comments made by women, and those by men. I assume, rightly or wrongly, that because the study's focus is women, it is the women's voices we are hearing/reading, but I am not certain. Nor is any continuing comparison made of women's and men's experiences. This would have served to highlight the distinctive features of each gender's assessments of their online experience, and made the results more compelling.

The audience for this book is clearly U.S. online educators. The experience documented here and the lessons learned will be of interest and use to online educators elsewhere as well, at least to provoke comparisons with their and their learners' own experience of online learning. This book will have provided a great service if it prompts others to follow the author's lead and conduct, document and publish their own experience.

